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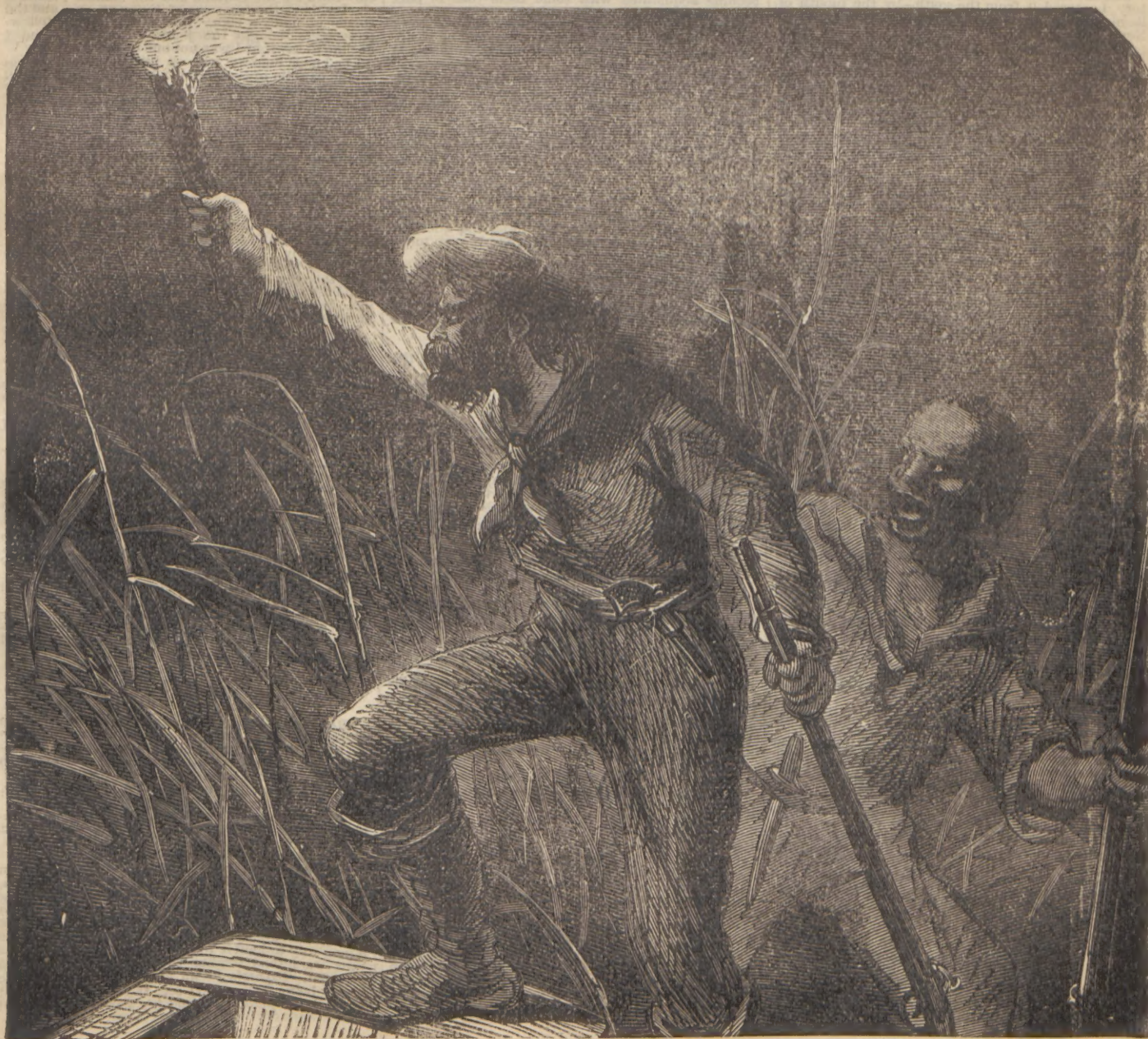
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No. 87.

THE LAND PIRATES; or, THE LEAGUE OF DEVIL'S ISLAND.

A TALE OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

BY CAPTAIN MAYNE REID.



The Land Pirates;

OR,
The League of Devil's Island.

A TALE OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

BY CAPT. MAYNE REID,
AUTHOR OF "BLUE DICK," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A PAYING PRISON.

MANY long years have elapsed since I first set foot in the valley of the Mississippi. I had strayed thither a young and enthusiastic traveler, with scarce any other aim than adventure.

I soon discovered that I had got into the very ground where such a taste could be gratified. Amid scenes of softness or sublimity, or tranquil solitude or stirring life—amid varied types of nationality, and strange contrasts of character—scarce a day passed without its incident, nor week wanting in some episode worthy of remembrance. Many of them have, at least, proved worthy of mine; and I now look back upon them with that romantic interest by which the past often reflects itself in the mirror of memory.

That I am about to record is of a mixed character—a drama in which there are scenes of pain as well as pleasure—both of real occurrence.

Whether interesting or no, they may be deemed improbable; though not by those who have studied the social characteristics of the Mississippi valley at the period to which they refer—before the "Far West" had commenced receding from the great river, and its settlements had refused to give shelter to those outcasts of society, who own no law but that of the *lex talionis*, and no lawyer but Lynch.

Unlike most travelers through Mississippian territory, I entered it from the south—by the mouth of its main river—making my first station in the city of New Orleans.

It was late in the spring when I arrived there. And soon after the red cross, beginning to show itself on the doors of the humbler dwellings that lay "swampward," warned me of the presence of that terrible epidemic, which there annually decimated the ranks of such strangers as were compelled to make their summer sojourn in the place.

Taking the hint, I bade a temporary adieu to New Orleans, intending to return to it after the first frost in the "fall."

Straying northward, here and there halting as chance or caprice directed, I was at length carried into the Ohio and up the Cumberland river to the capital of Tennessee.

By this time the forest foliage had become tinged with red and the leaf was beginning to fall. My stay, therefore, in the "City of Rocks," though pleasant, was not prolonged; and I made preparations for leaving it: not by a steamboat, as I had come, but on horseback—a mode of traveling I much preferred, as, in fact, the only one by which such a country can be seen.

With a stout roadster between my thighs, and a valise buckled to the croup behind me, I took the Franklin "pike," leading southward from the city.

I contemplated a long ride—so long, that were I to state the distance, it might test the credulity of my readers; as it did that of a traveler, who shortly after overtook me.

I had made some three miles along the dusty pike, and was nearly opposite a large pile of building, standing to the right of the road, when the traveler in question came gliding alongside.

He was upon a "pacer," and could soon have passed me; but instead of doing so, he checked his steed into a walk, and rode by my side. Glancing toward him, I saw that he was a young man, dressed in white linen coat and trousers, with well-fitting boots upon his feet, and a Panama hat upon his head.

"A planter" was my reflection, "or the son of one;" for he did not appear to be over twenty years of age.

"The Penitentiary!" he said, seeing that my eyes were fixed upon the building. "You've been in there, I suppose?"

The question sounded so odd, that my first impulse was to answer it with a laugh, which I did; though with no idea that it had been put through any discourtesy.

My interrogator, perceiving the droll interpretation his speech permitted, joined me in the laugh.

"Pardon me!" he said, apologizing. "Of course you know what I mean. I take you to be a stranger in these parts, and supposed you might like to know something of this State fortress of ours."

"A thousand thanks!" I rejoined. "You are right. I am a traveler, and as such not without curiosity. The State Penitentiary you say it is. I shall feel very much indebted to you for any information you may think proper to give me about it."

"Suppose you go with me inside? I know the governor, and can get admittance. It will be worth your while, if only to see Murrell."

"Murrell—who is he?"

"Oh! that of itself would tell you to be a stranger to Tennessee; else you would have heard of him. Murrell is the great pirate and robber of the Mississippi—long notorious upon the roads and rivers. He has committed scores of murders, it is said; and several have been proved against him. For all that, he is in for only ten years, and has already served

six of them. Would you like to have a look at him?"

"By all means."

"Come along, then!"

With this my new acquaintance wheeled his horse into the avenue leading up to the gate of the State Prison, whither, without another word, I followed him.

We were admitted, and courteously conducted through what appeared far more like a vast manufacturing establishment than a place of penal imprisonment; a manufactory, too, comprising almost every trade known to the necessities of civilization. I there saw hatters, tailors, shoemakers and carpenters; spinners and weavers, bakers and blacksmiths; all busy at their respective employments. Among the last-mentioned I saw the murderer Murrell—and through the coal-grime on his face, I could see the countenance of a man that by no means belied his terrible reputation.

His history was given me on the spot. By trade, originally, a blacksmith—the calling to which, like Vulcan, he was now condemned—he had forsaken it for the more profitable profession of piracy—not upon the high seas, as the term might seem to imply, but upon the rivers of the Mississippi valley—especially the great stream itself—his prey, instead of ships, being the "keels" and flat-boats descending, cargo-laden, to New Orleans, or their crews, returning along the up-river roads, and carrying the cash obtained for their commodities.

Murrell had been hard to catch, and harder still to convict. His confederates could be counted by the score—among them merchants, planters, justices of the peace, and even clergymen! The result was that he was sentenced to ten years in the Penitentiary, against at least ten times the number of highway robberies, and perhaps twice the count in horrid assassinations!

I shall never forget the disgust with which I contemplated this fiend in human shape. Not for long, I was only too glad to get out of the blacksmith's shop, and lay my leg once more over the saddle.

But in that visit to the Tennessee State Prison, I became acquainted with some facts that in part compensated for its unpleasantness.

I there learned that *crime may become its own cure*; that the industry proceeding from it may be so applied as to remove its cause, or at all events to release the State from taxation!

This fact, first discovered in the Tennessee Penitentiary, did not so much strike me at the time. I was then but a careless student in the science of political economy.

Only in latter years did I fully understand a statistic so astounding. Would that the bungling jailers of other and older States could comprehend its importance.

CHAPTER II.

A COURTEOUS INVITATION.

"WHERE are you riding to?" was the question asked by my new acquaintance, as we once more entered upon the pike.

"To New Orleans."

"Not on horseback?"

"On horseback."

"Why, it is a thousand miles. It will take you at least a month. You could get there by boat in a week."

"I know it."

"Oh! you have some object then in going by the road? Perhaps commercial?"

My fellow-traveler's eye rested for a moment on my valise, but evidently unsatisfied. It did not look much like the pack of a peddler.

"No," I said, in answer to his interrogatory. "Unfortunately for me, I am not able to offer such a substantial excuse for my journey."

"Well," he rejoined, "I know it's common enough to travel on horseback across to Memphis, when the water is low in the Cumberland, and there may not be a boat; but to ride all the way to New Orleans—that's a different affair. Do you really mean it?"

"I do."

"Excuse me for appearing inquisitive. It's a privilege we Western people assume to ourselves. I only asked, because it seems so odd for any one to undertake such a tedious journey."

"You are perfectly welcome to know my reason for undertaking it. I have made the up-journey from New Orleans to Nashville by boat, and for all I have learnt by it, I might as well have been stopping at the 'St. Charles Hotel,' at one end, or the 'Nashville Inn' at the other. My object is to see something of the interior of your country; and this is not to be accomplished on board a noisy steamboat."

"Ah! Now I perceive. No doubt you are right. As a stranger to our country—"

"How can you tell that?" I asked, abruptly interrupting him.

"Oh! that is easily told," was the prompt reply.

"For instance, the odd article strapped on the crupper of your saddle."

"Ah! the valise."

"Valise you call it? Here we only use the saddle-bags."

"I know it. I prefer the valise, as you see. I acknowledge your saddle-bags may be more convenient; but they are also more heating to the horse, and for that reason I incline to stick to my valise."

"Ha! I perceive you are a true traveler; and since you say you are journeying only to see the country, you can not be much pressed for time. I have made you acquainted with the inside of a Tennessee prison. I hope you will permit me to introduce you to something not quite so gloomy—a Tennessee cotton plantation. Perhaps you have not yet visited one?"

"It is very kind of you," I replied, more than ever impressed with the courtesy of my new acquaintance. "In truth, I have never seen a cotton plantation in my life."

"Well, if you will place yourself under my guidance, I shall be most happy to show you mine, or my father's, I should rather call it. It is not one of the largest, nor do we have cotton plantations in such perfection as you will see them further south—in Alabama and Mississippi. We are here on the northern edge of the cotton-growing climate, and the plants sometimes suffer from the frosts. Ours, however, will enable you to form some idea of one of the chief sources of Tennessee wealth; and I shall have much pleasure in taking you over it."

I accepted the invitation. It was, indeed, furnishing me with an opportunity I had intended seeking; for although, further south, I had made some acquaintance with sugar and tobacco plantations, I was yet ignorant of the mode by which the great commercial staple of the Southern States is produced and prepared for the market.

I could not help repeating my thanks for such kindness shown to a stranger—as I expressed it.

"Well, sir," was the reply, accompanied by a significant smile, "I have been, perhaps, taking an unfair advantage of you. You are not altogether such a stranger to me, though I only know you through another."

"Another! Who?"

"If I am not mistaken, you made the up-river voyage, about a month ago, in the steamer *Sultana*?"

"I did."

"Do you remember one of your fellow-passengers—a young lady, by name Miss Woodley?"

It is not likely I should have forgotten Miss Woodley, nor would any one who had ever seen her—to say nothing of having voyaged nearly a thousand miles in the same boat with her. She had come on board at a landing below Vicksburg on the Mississippi—a brother having brought her to the landing. Thence she had traveled alone to Nashville—changing boats, as I had myself, at the mouth of the Cumberland river. But if alone, she was not neglected. Both on the *Sultana* and the smaller steamer, she had been the cynosure of many an eye, and the theme of many a sigh. Half a score of her fellow-passengers thought the journey too short; and I decline to say that I was not one of the number.

I had been honored with an introduction given me by the captain of the *Sultana*; but the beautiful Cornelia Woodley was so surrounded by admirers that I found but slight opportunity of cultivating her acquaintance.

On leaving the boat at Nashville, I had bidden adieu, with but faint hopes of ever seeing her again. Her home was fifty miles from the capital of Tennessee. She had communicated this much, but, of course, without extending an invitation.

With this explanation, the reader will not be surprised that the name of Miss Woodley, pronounced by my new acquaintance, caused me to turn round in my saddle, and regard him with renewed interest.

"Certainly," I said, "I traveled on the same boat with Miss Woodley."

"I thought so," was the prompt rejoinder. "I could tell it was you from the description she gave me. I saw you as you rode out of town, and made haste to follow."

This kind of talk required explanation. In what relationship did my new acquaintance stand to my fair fellow-voyager? Was the young planter only a neighbor, whose intimacy had procured him the information detailed? I did not relish the conjecture of his being her lover. He was too good-looking to make the thought palatable. I preferred the fancy that he might be a brother. Before I could ask, I had the answer indirectly.

"I'm so glad you're going our way. I'm sure my sister will be most happy to see you."

"Oh! You are the brother of Miss Woodley, then?"

"One of them. There are two of us. I am the youngest of the lot. Henry, who is the oldest, don't live with us here. He has a plantation in Mississippi, below Vicksburg. That's where my sister has been. She spends her winters with him, and only comes to Tennessee for the summer months."

I felt secretly glad that the summer months had not yet quite passed away.

We rode on; from this time calling each other by name, and conversing as if we had been old acquaintances. More than ever did I long to become initiated into the economy of a cotton plantation.

CHAPTER III.

NAT BRADLEY.

I HAD been for some time expecting to see my guide strike into one of those side gates, sparsely appearing along the pike, and which I knew, by the pretentious piers of hewn post-oak, to be the entrances to some dwelling or plantation.

"How far is it to your father's place?" I asked, in a careless way, so as to conceal my impatience.

"Oh! a long way yet," was the discouraging reply. "At least forty miles. We can not reach it to-night. We must sleep in Columbia."

"Beyond Columbia it is?"

"A long way beyond. There's no cotton land on this side worth cultivating. It lies too far north, and the frost, as I've told you, often kills the young plants. Father's plantation is a good ways from the road, on one of the creeks that run into Duck river. It's capital soil for cotton, only that we have a long way to haul it to a steamboat landing. This year we intend sending the crop to New Orleans on a flat. Father's got an idea it will pay, and the boat's being built. You see, the creek runs right through our plantation, and it's wide enough to get

a flat through to the Duck. Once there, it's only to float down to the Tennessee and into the Ohio—then on to the Mississippi. We never did it before, but some of our neighbors have tried it, and they say it pays. Of course you know, after the crop's gathered the niggers haven't much to do, and half a dozen of them, with one or two of the regular river boatmen, can navigate a flat without much expense. By steamboat there's heavy freight charges just now; besides the hauling before you can get it aboard. There's no landing nearer our plantation than twenty miles, and with bad roads at that. We make a hundred and fifty bales every year, and as a team can only take four at a time, you can tell what a tedious affair it is. With a flat we can load right on our own land, close to the cotton-press."

I had become so interested in these details of cotton-planting that I had almost ceased to think of that other attraction which I expected to find upon the plantation.

It was something so original, so American-like, a crop raised in the very heart of a continent—amid forest-clad slopes apparently inaccessible—to be thus transported from the spot on which it was grown to a market more than a thousand miles distant, not by ship or steam, or the intervention of any kind of carrier to share the profits of transportation, but transported by the agriculturist who had grown it—going, as it were, direct from the producer to the consumer!

Absorbed in the contemplation of this curious problem in political economy—important as curious—I had for the time forgotten the traveling companion who had suggested it.

I was aroused from my reverie by hearing him exchange a salutation with some one who had met us on the road. On looking up I saw it was a horseman going in the opposite direction. He, too, had the appearance of a traveler, his horse dimmed with dust and dry sweat, with a pair of swollen saddlebags protruding behind his thighs.

He was a young man—apparently twenty-five—though with a countenance whose expression told of an experience far beyond his age—a circumstance by no means rare in the region of the South-west.

By his dress he would also have been taken for a planter; although it was unlike that worn by young Woodley. Like him, he had a Panama hat; but instead of white linen, his coat was a blouse of sky-blue cottonade, plaited and close-buttoned over the breast, while his trousers were of the same stuff and color. It was, in fact, the dress of the Louisianian creole, adopted by many Americans who have migrated to lands on the lower Mississippi.

"Well, Walt! Been to Nashville?" was the speech he had addressed to my companion, as they reined up their horses in the middle of the road.

"Nat Bradley!" exclaimed the young planter, evidently under some surprise, which might be caused by an unexpected encounter.

"Yes, Nat Bradley it is."

"Who'd have looked for you here? Where have you been?"

"Only out to take a squint at the old place. Mighty glad I got shet of it. You're all a set of fools for staying in Tennessee. Talk of growin' cotton up here! Mississippi's the place for that. Why, the meanest nigger on my plant can make two bales to your one."

"I've heard you have been having great success. My brother has written to say so."

"Has he, indeed? Well, it's a wonder he don't give up his corn-growing and try the cotton too. For my part I go in for the weed that fetches the ready cash—twenty cents to the pound. You've a good crop this year, haven't you?"

"I believe it is."

"How many bales are you countin' on?"

"Father thinks there will be nearly two hundred."

"Deuced handsome crop, if you can only get it safe to market. I've heard out on Duck you intend flatting it."

"Yes; we are building a boat for that purpose."

"Best way in the world. Far the best. No expense, no hauling, no freight charges of any kind. Besides, the steamers are eternally getting blown up. There's half a score of them bu't their boilers last season. Recommend me to the good old-fashioned flat. I always send my truck to Orleans that way, and would do so even if I could tumble the bales into a steamboat right off the plantation press. Last flat I sent down fetched me as lumber enough to pay all the expenses of takin' it there. Come straight from Nashville?"

"Yes."

"Know if there's any boat about starting for below?"

"I haven't heard."

"Hope there is. I want to get down to Mississippi. I only run up for a little business I had in Nash, and thought when so near, I might as well run out and have a look at the old diggin's on the Duck. Corneel's out there, ain't she?"

"Yes. My sister is with us."

"Of course I didn't see her, as your old man and I hain't been on the square ever since that—you know—D—d hot, ain't it?"

The last remark appeared to be by way of changing the subject, which I could see was not at all agreeable to my young companion.

"Very hot," was the assenting reply.

"The sooner we get out of it the better. You're bound straight for home, I suppose?"

"Straight."

The emphasis on the "you're," with a look cast toward me, was evidently meant to draw out a different answer; while in the glance, quick and furtive as it was, I could read in Nat Bradley's mind a sentiment hostile to myself.

"Well!" he exclaimed, turning to conceal his dis-

satisfaction, "I'm off, Woodley. Hope to see you some day in Mississippi. Good-by!"

And with another sullen side-look at me, which I did not fail to return, Nat Bradley struck the spur into his sweating horse, and went clattering off along the turnpike toward Nashville.

CHAPTER IV.

A QUEER CHARACTER.

THE impression produced upon me by this encounter was far from agreeable. It was, in truth, of the very opposite character. There was something in the style of the man we had met—both in his speech and demeanor—that provoked a feeling of indignation, as almost necessary to self-respect; and I had felt this from the moment of meeting him. Though neither word nor nod had passed between us, there was that in his regard which told me of an instinctive antagonism in our natures, and that he also felt it as I. I could see that he was what, in the Southern States, is termed a "bully." Its broad arrow was upon him—unmistakably impressed on his countenance, as well as in the way in which he carried himself. There was a swagger that seemed intended to conceal the coward. For all that, there was something in the rounded stoop of his shoulders, and the short, thick neck, that bespoke a courage sufficient for crime, and it did not require the butt of a pistol, protruding from his breast pocket, nor the hilt of a bowie-knife, shining among his shirt-ruffles, to tell that he was ready to use either weapon upon slight provocation, or perhaps without any at all.

It was the sight of these ugly insignia, carried so ostentatiously, that had produced my first feeling of aversion—soon strengthened, however, by the bantering tone in which he talked to my young companion, who appeared to treat him with more civility than he deserved.

More than all, the free, familiar way in which he spoke of the young planter's sister—which the latter did not appear to relish—this and the glances given to myself, had prepared me for a very surly conversation, had one been commenced between us. Indeed, had the interview lasted much longer, with the interchange of a few more such looks, the bad blood between us would have found expression in speech. As it was, we parted in mutual dislike, on both sides as clearly understood as though it had been spoken.

"Who is your swearing friend?" I asked, knowing that the question so put was not likely to give offense.

"Not much friend of mine."

"Nor of your father's, I should say?"

"Father can't bear the sight of him."

"An old acquaintance, I suppose? He appears to be familiar with your affairs."

I was thinking more of the mode in which he had spoken of Miss Woodley than of any thing else. The remark made about not having seen her, had jarred upon my ear. Why should he have said this at all? And why had the brother appeared to dislike it?

"Oh, yes. He is an old acquaintance," replied the young planter; "and ought to know a good deal of our affairs—at least until lately. I may say we were brought up together. His plantation adjoined ours—what once was his. That's what he meant by saying he was out to have a look at the old place."

"It is no longer his, you say?"

"No, the land now belongs to us."

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes. Nat has been what in Tennessee we call a 'wild blood,' if not something worse. He never would keep straight, nor stay among his own sort. He was always given to queer company—among the poor white trash, and what between spending money at their cock-fights, 'quarter-races' and 'candy-pullings,' he soon went through what was left of his father's plantation. It wasn't much, as his father before him was a good deal given the same way. The place came to the hammer; and, as it adjoined ours, my father bought it, along with some of the niggers. They tell queer stories about Nat, these same darkies. If only half be true, the less one knows of him the better. I only wonder that my brother gives him the encouragement he does."

"Your brother?"

"Yes; his plantation in Mississippi is not far from that you've heard Bradley speak of, where he can grow such crops of cotton. He appears to be getting rich again. My brother says so in his letters. Nearly a hundred niggers, and always a pocket full of money. How he got the start nobody can tell; but I think one might find out if they were to frequent the gambling-houses of New Orleans. Brother says he goes down there every winter, stays only a short time, and comes back to his plantation loaded down with dollars. Last year, he bought no less than fifty field-hands for his plantation. You've been to Orleans, you say?"

"I have."

"A terrible place for gambling, ain't it?"

"You are quite right."

"No doubt that explains how Mr. Nat Bradley started his new plantation. If it's 'poker' they play, there's not many will stand a chance with him. He had the name here when a boy, of beating even his father's own niggers at it."

"What! was he accustomed to play with them?"

"With any one who had a 'bit' to bet upon the game. That was before he went away. He was poor enough then, for he hung about here long after he had lost the plantation—cock-fighting, drinking, quarreling—some say, worse. So, stranger, after what I've told you, you won't wonder at my being a little cool with Nat Bradley, though he has been my school-fellow."

"On the contrary, I think you act very properly in keeping him at a distance."

"I wish brother Henry would do the same."

"What reason have you for thinking he does not?"

"Oh! plenty of reason. Henry receives him at his house, and he has even the impudence to talk to 'Corneel,' as you have heard him call my sister. Down in Mississippi State they have queer ways. As you may know, most of the Choctaw lands there, were settled by 'speculators,' and they're not very particular as to what a man is, so long as he makes money. Brother's an easy sort of fellow, and don't much mind what kind he goes with, if he can only get his fill of hunting. It was nothing else he moved to the Mississippi for; though he don't like to own to it. We see only a stray bear upon Duck, and deer are getting scarce, while both are still plenty in the canebrakes of the Mississippi bottom. But come, sir, you'll no doubt think me an inhospitable traveling companion; and our horses will have a sorry opinion of both of us. Here's old Spicer's tavern, where we stand some chance of getting a dinner, and in the cool of the evening we can ride on to Columbia."

We dismounted under the swing-sign of the "Lafayette Hotel;" and, after a little "sweetening," prevailed upon Major Spicer—a Tennessee tavern-keeper would not be of inferior grade—to consent that one of his darkies should take care of our horses, and that we ourselves might partake of the hospitality of the Lafayette Hotel—consisting of sweet potatoes and "pone" bread—fried pork and apple "sauce," with a stirrup cup of peach-brandy, to strengthen us for continuing our journey.

CHAPTER V.

PLANTATION LIFE.

THERE are not many chapters in my life's experience that I can look back upon with more satisfaction than that which records my stay upon a Tennessee cotton-plantation. With me it has ever been a pleasure to study the ways and sources of production, more especially those relating to the great staples, that not only interest, but influence the conduct of mankind. And perhaps none to a greater extent than that which, when fabricated, forms one of the most important items of our clothing—the plant *Gossypium*, lately relied upon to control a great national revolution.

I was shown its glaucous wool-covered seeds, the mode of sowing it, the way by which its young shoots were kept clear of weeds—the plant as it appeared in its snow-white flower, and afterward, when the bursting capsule displays the equally white staple, giving still greater delight to the planter's eye—then the gathering, the "picking" of those seeds, so tenacious as to require the machinery of the "gin;" and, lastly, the packing and "pressing" of the bales, which makes them ready for the dray, the flat, the steamboat, or the ship—ready for transport to the remotest parts of the earth.

All this I learned from Walter Woodley, his fair sister supervising the lesson.

I remember it well, though it would be more a wonder if I had forgotten it.

Far was I from thinking it tedious. I could have undergone it twice over; stayed to study its details for a second season, and another crop; but, chance guest that I was, I could no longer intrude even upon Tennesseean hospitality, and I prepared to take my departure.

I had spent ten days on the plantation; and, although in the retrospect I see only sunshine, I can remember that at the time there was just the suspicion of a shadow.

In the happy house of Equire Woodley, no stranger would have looked for a "skeleton;" and yet I suspected that there was one. It was only a suspicion, but strong enough to give me pain.

I had not forgotten Nat Bradley, nor the free and easy fashion in which he had talked of the affairs of the family. I had not forgotten the confident tone in which he had alluded to "Corneel."

Several times during my stay, the name of this gentleman had come up in conversation. With regard to the hostility which his father entertained for him, Walter had spoken the truth. There could be no mistaking that, to judge from the terms the old gentleman employed when speaking of the "scoundrel," as he plainly called Bradley; and it was clear to me that the squire knew something to Nat Bradley's discredit—more than he thought prudent to communicate to the younger members of his family.

Neither of these took any pains to defend their old school-fellow; for in childhood's days, according to backwoods custom, he had been the school companion of both. Neither ever attempted to speak a word in his favor. Walter even indorsed the sentiments of his father, while Miss Woodley was silent; but once or twice I fancied I could perceive in that silence some trace of embarrassment, and a desire on her part to escape from discussing the question. Could it be that there was some untold and secret history between this beautiful girl and that bold blackguard, Bradley? The thought pained me as a stranger—it pained me still more as my acquaintance with Miss Woodley assumed the familiarity of friendship.

True, it was only my own imagining; but this was strengthened by an incident that occurred previous to my leaving the plantation, and which in my mind had a sinister signification.

I had been several times down to the creek where the flat-boat was being built—that craft that was to carry the cotton-crop more than a thousand miles to market. I could not help taking an interest in this native specimen of naval architecture—a sort of Noah's ark of the Western waters. It was being constructed under the superintendence of a white man, a flat-boat builder by profession.

This person—whose name I had ascertained to be Bill Black—was assisted by a second individual, a white man like himself, who was a regular "Mississippi boatman."

The other "builders" were all black, the carpenters and common hands of the plantation, some of whom were afterward to act as "hands," in the navigation of the craft.

I had taken considerable interest in this ark's construction, though the Tennessee Noah, Mr. Bill Black, seemed anything but inclined to initiate me into the mysteries of his ship-yard. Several times that I had visited it alone, he had treated me with scant civility; and I had set him down as a morose brute. His acolyte, Stinger, was equally uncivil.

The demeanor of these men would have given me a very low opinion of what are called the "white trash" of Tennessee, but I learnt incidentally that neither belonged to the place.

They were, in fact "boatmen," whose home was here to-day, there to-morrow—wherever a chance of employment might turn up.

One evening Walter Woodley was absent when wanted by his sister for some purpose that required his presence upon the premises. Several messengers had been sent forth to find him.

Fancying he might be down at the creek, where the flat-builders were employed, and having nothing better to do, I sauntered in that direction to summon him. The place was half a mile from the house, and on the land formerly possessed by the Bradleys.

On reaching it, I found no one in the "ship-yard." It was after sunset, and the workmen, both white and black, were gone away for the night. I could see their tools stored in the shed.

As I had come on the wrong track to find the missing man, there was no reason for my hurrying home.

"He has got there by this time," was my reflection; and lighting a cigar, I strolled slowly back toward the house.

I had not gone far before discovering that speed would have been impossible had I wished making it. The path for the most part ran through a tract of woodland—huge trees thickly set—the heavy bottom timber of the creek. The twilight I had left behind me in the cleared space about the boat-yard, was no longer visible. Under the trees it was dark as the inside of a cave, only a little illuminated by the phosphorescent corrosion of the fire-flies, or "lightning-bugs," as the Tennesseans term them.

Instead of guiding me, these animated torches, with their fitful, unsteady sparkle, only rendered the track more deceptive, and I was compelled to proceed with circumspection, now groping my way among the tree-trunks, and now stooping to make sure of the path, by the glow of my cigar.

CHAPTER VI.

TWO STRANGE TALKERS.

I HAD got about half-way to the plantation-house, and nearly clear of the timber, when I heard voices, as of two men engaged in conversation. This it turned out to be—two men upon the same path I myself trod, but coming from the opposite direction.

By the time I had made this observation, they were close up to me.

They appeared to be making way faster than I—no doubt from being more familiar with the track. Though within less than a score of yards, I could not distinguish their figures, nor they mine, so deep was the obscurity of the place.

I was about to call out, so that we might not run foul of one another, when I recognized one of their voices. It was that of the uncivil boat-builder, Black. The other should be his assistant, Stinger?

Not caring for an encounter with these men—even so much as to saluting them—I stepped aside, intending to let them pass without making my presence known. It was easily done in the darkness, by gliding behind a tree.

"You think there'll be two hundred bales, Bill?"

"Darned close on it. The old 'un's had an all-fired fine crop."

"So much the better. See you make the boat big enough to carry it. Don't let a bale be left behind."

"Yer kin trust me for that. She'll take every bale of it."

"Good. If neatly managed, it'll be one of the finest hauls—Don't you smell tobacco?"

"Darned if I don't!"

"Somebody's been smoking here! A cigar, too. Like enough that strange fellow, or Walt Woodley himself. They've been this way—not a great while ago, neither."

For a short time there was silence, and I could tell that the two men had stopped in their track, and were listening.

Now, less than ever, did I care to accost Mr. Bill Black and his companion, who was not Stinger, though who I could not guess. And yet the voice did not seem altogether unfamiliar. I fancied I had heard it before.

I stood still as the tree-trunks around me, and equally motionless. I had already taken the cigar from my teeth, and held it with the coal between my fingers.

I was in hopes of hearing something more said, for there was just a taint of mystery in the nature of the dialogue to which I had commenced listening. Who could the man be that took such an interest in the bulk of the flat-boat, and the shipment of Squire Woodley's cotton?

Perhaps the overseer of the plantation?

This was a man I had only spoken to once or

twice, but with whose voice I was not enough familiar to account for the fancy of my having heard it before.

I was forced to be satisfied with the conjecture, for the two men no longer conversed aloud, but in a tone so low, I could not make out what they said.

After standing a few seconds to satisfy themselves that they were alone on the path, they moved on again, and were soon entirely out of my hearing.

As I continued toward the house, I could not help dwelling upon the incident, trifling as it might appear. The voice of the second speaker still kept vibrating in my ear, although it otherwise defied identification. I did not feel convinced of its being that of the overseer.

On reaching the plantation-house I had evidence to the contrary. The man was there himself, standing by the gate! He could not have got to the ground before me.

I found Walter Woodley at home, and related to him the scraps of conversation I had overheard.

"Some of our neighbors," he said, with a careless laugh, "who take this interest in our affairs, though I cannot tell which of them I am to thank for being such a well-wisher. Ah! I fancy I can explain it. We propose to allow a percentage on every bale that reaches New Orleans without getting wet or otherwise damaged. Likely enough, it's some friend of Black, the boatman, who's been congratulating him on his chance of making a good thing of it."

"By the way," continued the young planter, changing the subject, "I've been down by Neal's ferry since dinner, and who do you suppose I should see crossing there?"

"How should I know, being a perfect stranger to everybody around you?"

"Ah! true. But you've seen him; and heard us talk of him—Nat Bradley."

"Nat Bradley! He here? I thought he said he was going down the river."

"He did; but for all that, he's here again."

"For what purpose?" I asked, inspired by an unpleasant thought.

"Heaven only knows. He didn't seem too well pleased at seeing me. I suppose he fancied I might think it strange, after his telling us he was off for Mississippi. He explained by saying there was no boat at Nashville ready to start. Now that I know not to be true; for I've heard elsewhere that there was one went down about ten days ago—just in time for him to have gone by her. He's a queer fellow; and it's hard to say what he's dodging about here. He told me he was on the way to a nigger trader's near the Tennessee shoals, who'd got some hands to sell, and, as he'd heard they could be had cheap, he was going to buy some of them. From there he intended riding across to Memphis, and taking boat for below. He must be making money, somehow, as he talked of buying no less than twenty of the trader's lot."

While listening to this long explanation, I imagined I had obtained a clue as to the voice I had heard in conversation with Bill Black, the boatman. It was the same that had jarred so disagreeably on my ear while pronouncing the name "Corney."

I stated my suspicion to the young planter.

"Like enough," was his reply, "though I didn't know he was acquainted with Black, nor can I see what difference it should make to him about our having a large crop, or how we get it to market!"

Neither could I; and it was just this that continued to mystify me, long after we had ceased to converse on the subject.

Strange enough, no one of the neighborhood had either seen or heard of Nat Bradley's reappearance on the place.

During the three days that intervened before my departure from the plantation, I had not failed to make inquiries—of course in an indirect manner—but no one knew of a second visit of Nat Bradley. His first I had frequently heard spoken of. There was nothing strange in it. On the contrary, it was but natural that a man of broken fortune, once more rebuilt, should return to his native place, to receive the congratulations of his friends, as well as to triumph over his enemies.

His second visit made in such secrecy—and with a falsehood for its excuse—must have had some object of a less honest kind.

I could not help thinking so; and more than once the thought returned to distress me.

CHAPTER VII.

A HUNTING PLANTER.

NOTWITHSTANDING my reluctance to leave the Tennesseean plantation, the event could no longer be delayed. I could bear the thought with greater equanimity that I had hope soon again to see my fair instructress in the statistics of cotton-planting.

"On my journey through the Mississippi State, I must call on her brother Henry. His plantation was not much out of my way. He could give me such sport, hunting bears and deer and panther, shooting swans, egrets and eagles. She herself would be going down soon—perhaps Walter, too. Would I not stay till they came?"

Who would have declined such an invitation? Not I. My difficulty was to conceal an eagerness in its acceptance. I promised to pay this visit to the hunting brother; and provided with the proper credentials of introduction, I bade adieu to my Tennesseean acquaintances, and once more set my face for the South.

I had long since left behind me the region of turnpikes, and my route lay over roads where the hoof struck only on the softly-turfed surface of the earth. Now and then it coincided with the old "Natchez trace"—that once much-traveled highway, on which Murrell had committed many of his murders.

In due time—and with only those slight mischances

which form rather the charms of travel—I reached the Mississippi plantation, and presented my letters of introduction to the proprietor. I was received with all the warmth of Western hospitality. Indeed, by my new host, Henry Woodley, credentials would scarce have been called for. Sufficient for him to know that I was fond of hunting, to have insured me a warm reception. With the addition of such introduction as I carried, it was only made the warmer; and I was received with as much zeal as if, instead of that pretty epistle from his sister, I had brought one from the old squire containing a check for a thousand dollars.

I was not long upon the plantation of Mr. Henry Woodley, till I could tell that this last would not have been unwelcome. Here everything was different from the old homestead in Tennessee.

Instead of a handsome "frame house," well filled with furniture that approached the fashionable, I was introduced to a dwelling of a less pretentious kind. It was a large log-cabin, comfortable enough, but with no claim to architectural style. It stood inside of an inclosure of rude rail-fence, overshadowed by trees and surrounded by a shrubbery of magnolias, osage, orange, and other fair forms of vegetation, just as the forest had furnished them. At the back were the cooking quarters, standing apart; beyond them the stabling, and to one side a group of negro-cabins, at some distance from the dwelling. Despite the primitive rudeness of the place, there was that picturesqueness that is pleasing to the eye.

There were, withal, sufficient signs to insure comfort, and a kennel close by, containing a score of stag-hounds—some of them showing scars that could only have been made by the claws of bear or panther—promised something more—that sport of which their proprietor was so passionately fond—the grand chase.

It was for this, in truth, that Henry Woodley had selected his new home; for this consented, year after year, to endure the summer heats, and breathe the miasma of the Mississippi swamps—not to make a fortune in the culture of cotton and tobacco. His corn-growing was intended only to feed the horses in his stable, as well as the hogs required for the sustenance of the negro-quarters and the kennel.

Henry Woodley was not the only man I had met who, under the pretense of being a planter, passed three-fourths of his time in the chase—his farming being only a pleasant fiction—a pretext, to escape from the charge—even the self-accusation—of having nothing to do! Hundreds of such characters there are in the Mississippi valley.

Inside, as without, you had evidence of the house being a true hunter's home. In the vast open porch, with its adjoining gallery, you were surrounded by trophies of the chase—borns, skins and claws, suspended alongside a miscellaneous assortment of guns and riding-gear, nets, traps, and fishing-tackle.

Soon after my arrival, my host commenced initiating me into the ways of a Southern sportsman's life; and ere long I was introduced to the different kinds of chase practiced upon the Mississippi.

In less than a month I had collected, on my own account, most of those trophies that fall to the lot of a Mississippi hunter. Among them were skins of the black bear, the red puma or "painter" of the back-woodsmen, the spotted lynx—better known by the name of "wild-cat"—wolves, black and gray, with raccoons, opossums, skunks, swamp-rabbits, and other four-footed "varmints." In my collection were the antlers of the Virginia stag, the scaly skin of the alligator, as also the singular gar-fish, or shark of the South-western waters.

Birds, too, figured among my trophies, including a fine specimen of the wild turkey, whose weight, when shot, was thirty pounds in the scale. I had obtained also the tall American crane, the trumpeter swan, the curious snake-bird, the blue heron, the white egret, the scarlet ibis, and many other beautiful birds, obtainable on the banks and bayous of the lower Mississippi.

The king of all, however—the white-headed eagle—was still wanted to complete my museum. Several times I had seen this splendid bird soaring aloft, or winging his way across the river. But, like most of the falcon tribe, the white-headed eagle is shy of the approach of man; and I had never succeeded in getting a shot at one. All the more did I desire to add the eagle to my collection.

My host, eager to gratify me, caused inquiries to be made.

It ended in our hearing of a "roost" upon one of the islands, some twenty miles down the river, where a nest had been observed in the spring, and afterward the brood of birds—a single brace, along with their parents.

In the neighborhood of a nest where they have succeeded in bringing forth their young the eagles can more easily be approached. Where they have been so long permitted to go undisturbed, their confidence becomes established. Knowing this, I determined on making an excursion to the island.

On this occasion I was to go without my host, accompanied only by one of his negroes, named "Jake." I had made several excursions so attended when the young planter was otherwise occupied—Jake and the skill being always placed at my disposal.

The darkey knew the island in question, though he had never landed upon it; and what I thought strange, did not seem to relish the idea of guiding me to the place! At other times he had shown the greatest eagerness to be my hunting companion, as it afforded him a pleasanter time than any other employment upon the plantation.

It would be a two hours' pull down-stream, and might take us twice that time to return—the river here running with a rapid current, especially in proximity to the island.

Perhaps it was the prospect of so much toil under a hot sun that was rendering Jake so reluctant; and with this explanation to myself, I followed my unwilling conductor to the skiff.

CHAPTER VIII. THE WHITE-HEAD EAGLE.

We started a little after daylight; and as my skiffman had forewarned me, found the current exceedingly sharp, and not a little dangerous especially as we approached the island.

What with snags, whirls and "sawyers," we had some difficulty in making land, and might not have succeeded, but for a large tree that had fallen over the bank and formed a sort of pier to which we were able to make fast the skiff. The tree was a gigantic cottonwood, whose weight had hindered the current from carrying it off.

Scrambling along the trunk, I at length succeeded in planting my foot upon *terra firma*.

The nest I supposed could not be far off, and by the directions given me, I could easily find it.

The darky did not seem inclined to go ashore, or otherwise assist me in the search. He made some excuse about taking care of the skiff, and in the skiff I left him.

I again thought his behavior strange, but made no objection to his remaining. In finding the eagles, the old negro could be of no particular service to me. The island did not appear to be of any great superficial extent. I could soon traverse it in every direction. If the birds were upon it, I should see or hear them, and in stalking them I would be better alone—my sable companion not being much of a sportsman.

Getting over the ground did not prove such an easy task. It was thickly studded with heavy timber—cottonwood, tulip-tree, and cypress; and between the trunks there was an undergrowth of palmettoes, in places almost impenetrable.

Although the sun was shining brightly—I had left it so outside the island—under the trees it resembled twilight. In addition to their own thick foliage, they were festooned with Spanish moss, that shut out the sky like a curtain.

I soon despaired of seeing anything of the eagles. Looking overhead, I could not see the sky—much less any object depending upon its brightness for being made visible.

I began to think of going back to the river-bank; and had already stopped in my tracks, when I perceived a slender list of light stealing through the timber beyond. It might be that I had arrived near the other side of the island. In any case, it was worth while going on to see; and I proceeded toward the light.

It proved only an opening among the trees, where a gigantic deadwood, divested of its leaves, permitted the sunlight to descend upon the earth.

The tree, an enormous *liquidambar*, had been struck by lightning, and long since dead. The parasites, that would otherwise have been sustained by its sap, had perished along with it, and, dropped from its branches, lay strewn upon the ground below. Its huge limbs, blanched and twigless, were stretched like skeleton arms toward the sky. Its main stem had been broken off near the summit; yet still overtopped the surrounding forest.

In the fork where the fracture had occurred, I could see a huge protuberance that did not seem part of the tree. It was a collection of dead sticks and branches, rudely wattled together, evidently the nest for which I was searching.

As I stood regarding it with upturned eyes, a strange sound came into my ears, almost filling them with its harsh intonations. I can compare it to nothing so near to what it seemed as the filing of a huge frame-saw, or the laugh of a maniac escaped from his keeper.

As I stood listening, it seemed to repeat itself in echoes, as if the whole island had suddenly been converted into a pandemonium.

I was not dismayed. The sound was not unknown to me. I knew it to be the scream of the white-headed eagle.

I had just time to get my rifle ready for firing, when four of these grand birds—the parents and brood of which I had heard spoken—came sailing overhead. Their broad-spreading wings shadowed the patch of open ground as they soared majestically above the blighted tree.

I was in hopes that one or other of them would alight, and give me a chance of obtaining something like a fair shot. But in this I was disappointed. Even over their own nest they were shy. It had been long forsaken, and the first that uttered the cry had sprung up from it, alarmed by my presence below.

I waited for some time, but perceiving that they did not intend to alight, I determined to risk the chance of a flying shot. What would I not have given at that moment for a smooth-bore, loaded with "buck"! Unfortunately I carried a rifle, with only a single bullet.

The four eagles continued to circle around the forsaken nest.

I observed that only two out of the four had the white head and tail. The other two were of a uniform dusky brown. The former I knew to be the old birds with plumage matured.

Choosing the larger of these, I took aim and fired. The eagle fell at my feet, crippled by a shot through the shoulder.

But I had not yet secured my prize, and on through the palmettoes I rushed after the wounded bird, that went screaming and fluttering before me.

More than a hundred yards were made in this way, when a blow from the butt of my rifle at length put an end to the scrambling chase, and the eagle was

mine. It was the female—a fine bird, in perfect plumage.

By this the other three had gone clear off from the island, as I could tell by their screams heard dying away in the far distance.

CHAPTER IX. THE "DEVIL'S ISLAND."

PROUD of my achievement I shouldered the prize, and started to return to the skiff.

I had not gone three steps when I again stopped, to simply ask myself the way. I saw that I had lost it.

The chase after the wounded eagle, both tortuous and prolonged, had carried me out of sight of the deadwood, as well as the light let down through its leafless branches. I was once more in the midst of a continuous twilight.

I looked for my tracks. Taking time and pains, I might have discovered and retraced them. But the spread-fans of the palmettoes quite covered the ground, and I had not the patience to put them aside for such exploration. I supposed the island to be of only some forty or fifty acres in extent; and, by keeping straight on in any direction, I must soon come to its edge. Following this, would in time bring me to the skiff.

Taking a straight shoot through the underwood, I walked briskly on, and, as I expected, soon saw the sunlight gleaming before me.

There was an opening with water; but, as I drew near to it, I could see that it was not the river, but a sort of lagoon or pool of stagnant water.

I kept for a short distance along its edge, and discovered that it communicated with a "bayou" that appeared to lead out into the river.

I fancied that it would take me the wrong way, and was turning to make a traverse in the opposite direction, when something down under the bank caught my eye. I first took it for a floating log; but, on closer scrutiny, it proved to be an old canoe of the kind known as a "dug-out."

It was moored to the root of one of the great cypresses that overshadowed the water. It was partially concealed by the outstretched fronds of the palmettoes that grew around the root of the cypress.

On seeing the dug-out, I supposed there was some other party upon the island; but, stepping down and examining it, I saw that its rude hawser of twisted grape-vine must have been holding it there for months. Some worthless, worn-out craft, abandoned, perhaps forgotten.

While making this reflection, my eye wandered to the opposite side of the pool. There I observed other signs of human presence, though not recent. There was a little spot of cleared ground, above a high bank that looked as if it had been used for a landing. Fragments of coarse canvas, such as is used for cotton "bagging," were strewn over it, and there were the ashes of an old fire.

I thought it strange to see such relics in that solitary place, and walked away, wondering what could have taken them there.

My speculations, however, were soon interrupted by the necessity of finding my way back to the skiff, which proved more difficult than I had expected.

Not till I had wandered about for a full half-hour, and scratched my skin among the sharp spikes of the palmettoes, did I succeed in reaching my place of debarkation, and then only by shouting myself hoarse, and getting a responsive shout from the skiffman.

"I's glad, massa, you got safe 'board 'gen," said he, as I stepped into the boat.

"Why?" I asked, wondering at the remark as well as the alacrity with which the darky pulled away from the cottonwood.

"Kase I t'ink dat 'ere island a dangerous place."

"Dangerous place! In what way?"

"Doan' no, massa, doan' no. But folks do say de debil hab been see'd an' heerd dar ob nights. One ob Mass' Bradley's black people tole me so. Mass' Bradley's plantation not far off on toder side, but none o' dem niggas ebba goes on dat island. Nob'dy else ebba go dar. Sartin shoo de place am ha'nted."

I could now comprehend why my companion had shown such aversion to accompany me in my excursion.

I could not help smiling at his superstition, though I was not a little chagrined at his not having sooner confided it to me, so that I might have made a more careful exploration of the interesting locality.

When I thought of the gloomy obscurity of its shadows, the deep, dark lagoon, that slept stagnant under its trees, the weird drapery of Spanish moss, that thickly festooned their branches, I did not much wonder at the superstitious awe with which my sable-skinned companion had been led to regard it. It was just the kind of a spot to be "haunted;" but no doubt the abandoned dug-out, and the other *reliquia* I had observed, had I taken time to examine them, would have given a clew to the "debil," supposed by Jake and his colored acquaintance of the Bradley plantation, to have made it his abiding-place.

CHAPTER X.

THE ISLAND PLANTATION.

ON the subject of the Bradley plantation—suggested, no doubt, by its proximity—my skiffman became communicative; and during the long pull up-stream, made me acquainted with some facts relating to the place and its proprietor, that were, to say the least, a little curious.

Mr. Bradley's clearing was upon a large island, formed by a "shute" of the river on one side, and by an old channel, which the stream had long since abandoned. There was nothing singular about this. I had become already aware that there are several

plantations so situated on the South-western rivers—where the house can only be reached by a ferry-boat, kept to communicate with the mainland.

For hundreds of miles, on both banks of the river—more especially on the right—the bottom-lands are scarred and seamed by a labyrinthine network of creeks, bayous, and lagoons, all old channels of the river, which the current in its caprice has long since forsaken, leaving them in deep, dark stagnation, or only moving sluggishly to and fro, during the season of floods.

On one of the tracts of land so insulated Mr. Bradley had "located," and there was nothing strange in it. What did seem strange to my informant was that "Mass' Bradley had come dar wif only two or t'ree darky at fust; an' now he had amoss as many niggas as de old Squire Woodley in Tennessee; an' all dat in less'n no time. He was always a-buyn' new hands from de nigga dealers dat fetch 'em from up de country, tho' he nebba bo't any jess about dar. He bo't de wuss kind o' cusses, 's nobody else ked manage. He manage 'em, he do, dat same bossy Bradley. He nebba 'lowed one o' 'em to go off dat 'ere plantashun, cep'in he hab bizness; an' if dey 'teal off to any odder house, which dey sometime do by swimmin' crosst de bayou in de night, den dey catch it. Not offen dey try; dar's no odder place nearer dan Mass' Woodley's, an' dat's ten mile by de ribba, an' most twenty through de bottom! If dey ebba come dar, don't he fotch dem back, an' don't he larrup 'em! Gollys! he do make de darky squirm! He got an obaseah who flog wuss dan de very debil hisself. Whugh!"

From what I had myself seen, I could believe all this of Nathaniel Bradley; and some other things equally to his discredit, of which the black skiffman forthwith informed me.

But I wanted to know of something that interested me much more—the relations that existed between this insulated cotton-planter and Jake's own master. I had learnt enough to know that they were intimate. I wished also to know why.

I knew enough of Mississippi planter society to know that character had little to do with social standing. The "chivalry" that had settled down on the late Choctaw lands was far from being without reproach. With it, riches, and a ready use of the revolver, were often the chief titles to respect; and Nat Bradley, bully as he was, would be just the man to "shine" in the society of Vicksburg and its environs—a town which only a few years before had actually been taken possession of by a score of ruffian "sportsmen." They had for weeks held carnival in its streets, insulting every citizen who dared to gainsay them.

It is true these "sportsmen" were in the end punished; but the old heaven still stayed; and at the time I write of, was almost rife as ever. What I had heard of Bradley, both in Tennessee and since, made him by no means an exceptional character—only a type of the Mississippian of that time.

It was the character of Henry Woodley that caused me to feel surprise at the association; for the latter so far from being of the bully class was altogether the opposite. Though living a life that might be almost termed rough, and associating in the class with rough men, he was of a refined and sensitive nature—I might almost say timid. Keen hunter as he was, it might seem a contradiction; but such was in reality the fact.

Why should such a man find congeniality in the company of Nat Bradley?

To talk of my host and his affairs was a delicate subject, especially with his own slave. I should have avoided it, but for the interest I had begun to feel in one nearly related to him.

Thinking of her, I could not restrain myself from that indirect questioning that might give me satisfaction.

"This Mr. Bradley don't appear to be much of a favorite of yours, Jake?"

"Nor nob'dy ess's, massa. All our darky hate um like de pisen-snake."

"Your white folks, though? They don't hate him?"

"Doan' know, massa. Not so shoo 'bout dat."

"For instance, your own master. He's a great friend of Mr. Bradley—is he not?"

"Ah, young Mass' Henry. He fr'en's wif ebbery-body. He no kill a 'skeeter, ef it bite um on de nose; though he do like kill de b'ar, an' de painter, an' dem odder big varmint. Dat's diff'rent. Den he 'cited by de chase an' barkin' ob de dogs. Whugh! Don't he go changed when he hear de growl o' de hown's? He arn't like de same indiwiddle."

"I know he's very fond of hunting, and hunters too; but Mr. Bradley never hunts, and your master appears very fond of him?"

"Maybe he am—maybe he an't."

After making this ambiguous rejoinder, Jake leant industriously to his oars, and for some time remained silent.

Feeling perfectly satisfied that no son of Africa could terminate a dialogue, with such an unsatisfactory conclusion, I waited for him to resume speech.

I had not long to wait. Scarce a dozen strokes of the oar.

"Dar may be a reason, sar, why Mass' Henry show fr'en'ship you 'peak 'bout. Dar am many kewrious thing down hyar in de Massissipp'y State; an' maybe dat 'ere am one ob dem."

"Ah! you think the friendship is not real? There is something—"

"Behin' de bush. Dat dere is fo' sartin; an' dis nigger know it."

"Some influence, perhaps?"

"Yes, massa 'tranger. Dar am infloence."

"Of what kind?"

My heart beat quickly as I asked the question—

audibly as I listened for the answer. I expected to hear something of Miss Woodley.

"Wal, massa," replied the skiffman, after a short while apparently spent in cogitation, "I know you Mass' Henry's fr'end, an' doan' know why I shouldn't tell you all 'bout de bizness 'tween youn' Henry an' Boss Bradley."

"I am your master's friend," I said, to encourage him. "You can trust me, Jake."

"Wal, sar, it war jess dis: one day dey war out in de woods, on a big deer-drive. Dar war Mass' Henry hisself, an' Mass' Bradley—dat war de only day I ebba know him go huntin'—an' dar war sebbel odder ob de planters 'bout hya, all huntin' together. De drive war oba, an' dey'd all sot down to take a spell ob res, an' eat de vittles dat de niggas hed brought in de wag'n. Den dey got to playin' cards, an' I's b'lieve it war de Boss Bradley dat fust proposed dem. You know Mass' Henry nebbel play, on de cards—dat am, he nebbel play fo' money. But dey'd all been a-drinkin'—de hunters an' de planters—an' dar war mint-julep, an' claret sangaree, an' dat 'ere stuff like ginga-beer dey caa sham-pain. So dey all set-to to de card-playin', Mass' Henry 'mong de res. Dey played poker, an' dey played a French game dey caa yuka, an' staked, golly! dey staked as high as a hundred dollar apiece! Ob coas' Mass' Henry knowin' jess nex' to nuffin' 'bout de game—he war boun' to lose. Whugh! he did lose. Two thousand dollars—ebbery red cent! an' who d'ye s'pose he lose 'em to?"

"Who?"

"Why, dat same Bossy Bradley. Ob coas' Mass' Henry hadn't no money on de groun', for who's a-gwine to be a-toatin' two thousand dollars 'bout 'im? So he guv de planter Bradley his writin' fo' de amount—which dem call a purnissory note. Wal, dat 'ere note ar'n't been paid yet; an' it's de no-payment ob it dat make Mass' Henry 'pear sech fr'en's wi' mass' planter Bradley. Now, sar, ye got de explication ob de whole circumstance."

"I hope it is the true one."

"What, massa! Why for you hope dat? You say you Mass' Henry fr'en? Sure you no wish 'im two thousand dollars debt to Bossy Bradley?"

It was not strange the negro should express surprise at my speech. I had answered mechanically, and without thought of the interpretation he might put upon it—thinking only of myself, and the relief his explanation had caused me.

It was now my turn to explain. I could not leave Jake in the belief that I was gratified to hear of his master's indebtedness.

"No, no!" I responded, endeavoring to explain away what I had said. "I merely meant that I hoped it was no worse. Two thousand dollars is not much—for a rich planter to pay."

"Lor, massa! It am a big heap, two thousand dollar! Great big heap fo' young Mass' Henry! He nebba pay dat hisself till de old squire die, an' leab um some ob dat 'ere plantashun in Tennessee. He no make money hyar like Bossy Bradley. Ah! Mass' Henry 'pend more'n he make. Dat dis chile am sure ob. Cuss dem cards, anyhow! Dey's de ruin ob ebberybody dat teches um, 'ceptin de gammelin' sportsmen demselves. T'ank de Lor! I hear Mass' Henry sw'a he nebba tech dem no more. Dat's one bit o' satta-facshun, it is."

Notwithstanding that I feared being thought too inquisitive, the intelligence displayed by my sable companion tempted me to inquire further.

"Does Mr. Bradley often visit your master?"

"Well, sar, dat depend—"

"On what?"

"On de seezun ob de y'ar."

"On the season of the year! You mean he comes at one time more than another?"

"Yes, sar; jess so."

Jake had ceased to be communicative, and required drawing.

"I suppose there are times when business requires him to be at your master's plantation?"

"Wal, ye see, dar's de summer seezun, he doan' come much den. I b'lieve him been only twice dis summer, an' de once you see um you se'f, sar. An' dar's de winter seezun. Den Mass' Bradley go good deal down to de grand city—Orleans. So de folks say."

"That would leave him no time to visit your master's plantation."

"Ah! he find time fo' dat."

"But when?"

"Wal, sar, I tell you when: when mass'r's sister—Miss Cornelia—come down to 'tay on de plantashun. Dat am de troof."

More than half prepared for the communication, it did not come with such a surprise. To conceal my thoughts from him who had made it, I said, with an air of carelessness—which cost me an effort:

"Perhaps he is Miss Woodley's sweetheart?"

"Maybe so, sar; maybe so."

Though Jake's answer was not conclusive, I forbore to question him further. I had started a subject that was causing me pain; and further disclosures could only increase it.

After all, what was Miss Woodley to me? The interest I felt in her—was it more than friendship? Why should I interfere in an affair that did not concern me? Cornelia Woodley was no child; but an accomplished lady of several seasons' experience. If she chose to throw herself away upon this worthless man, why should I care? And if I did, what could I do to prevent it? Both she and her brother were strangers to me. I had no right to give counsel; nor would they be likely to accept it.

My best way would be to avoid even the desire for interference; and to do this, I must forsake the society to which chance had accidentally thrown me. It was only to take horse, and continue my travels.

It would be a complete change of programme; but the circumstances required it. The prospect of seeing Miss Woodley again, so pleasant on leaving Tennessee, I could now only contemplate with pain. The promise I had made could be easily broken. She would scarce care for my keeping it.

From these gloomy reflections, I was startled by the voice of the skiffman.

"Talk ob de debbil," said he, "an' dat genlum shoo to be clost by. Dis time, however, we wa' talking ob de angel."

"An angel! What do you mean, Jake?"

"Look yonda, sar! What you see yonda?"

"I see a steamboat."

"Ya—jess so. An' in dat 'teamboat dar am a angel! Sartin shoo dar am."

"I don't understand you."

"Golly, mass'r! Doan' ye see dat de boat go stop at Mass' Woodley landin'?"

"Yes; I see that."

"Wal, what she go dar for but put some'dy 'shore? She take no freight from dar, kase we hab none to gub her. We make no cotton, nor no corn to spare from de plantashun. Shoo, den, she land some passenger; an' sartin shoo dat passenger am de young missa come down from ole Tennessee. Tole ye so, sar. Look! de boat shove off 'g'in, an' you see 't am de Cherokee, one ob dem Cumberlan' boats dat run up to Nashville."

About the boat he was right. In ten minutes after she came booming past, almost swamping our eggshell of a skiff. I read upon her side the lettering "Cherokee."

I could not help looking with interest upon that splendid craft, in whose gilded saloon had lately sat the woman then occupying my thoughts. But it was an interest clouded with apprehension.

On reaching Henry Woodley's house, I learned that his sister had arrived by the Cherokee, and Nat Bradley along with her!

CHAPTER XI.

HOSTILE GUESTS.

YES, Nat Bradley had landed from the boat along with her, and was there at the house, apparently a welcome guest!

It was with difficulty I could conceal my chagrin, despite the silliness of my showing it.

I succeeded, however, determined next day to take leave of a hospitality that had hitherto given me pleasure, but henceforth could only cause pain.

Bradley did not stay for the night. He had come ashore there, because there was no landing-place on his own plantation. He had been up to Vicksburg on business, and had availed himself of the steamboat to return.

These particulars I gathered from his conversation with my host. I regarded them as plausible excuses. No doubt he had been up to Vicksburg; but not upon business. He had gone there to meet Cornelia Woodley, and accompany her back in the boat. Nothing could be clearer.

He took his leave, borrowing a horse from my host, and promising to bring him back on the morrow. Before that time I, too, determined upon being gone.

It was easier to talk of such a determination than to carry it out. It is not often that the singed moth succeeds in escaping from the candle, nor the bird from the serpent that allures it. And with either of these might my case be compared.

My proposal of departure was met by surprise on the part of my planter host. So abrupt! So unexpected! He would not hear of it. It would be such a disappointment to him. He had been organizing a grand hunt—the grandest we had yet had—a bear *battue* in the canebrakes of the Arkansas side, and all for my especial entertainment. Surely I would not disappoint him?

"You will not?" said his sister, as we were left for a moment alone.

I scarce knew what to say.

"Why do you leave us in such haste?"

Still less could I make answer to this question.

"It is very unkind of you," she continued to urge; "and not very gallant," added she, with a provoking pout. "You appear to have been contented here till I came. I shall think you are running away to avoid me."

There was truth in this, though not in the sense she intended.

I was on the eve of making reply—of reiterating my determination to depart—of telling her why I had taken it—perhaps of speaking some silly reproach.

I was prevented from making this fool of myself by a generosity I little deserved.

"Do stay!" she said, coming near, and almost entreating me. "My brother will be so vexed by your leaving us; and I, too. If you go I shall always think it was my presence that had driven you away."

What could be the meaning of that speech? It made me feel that I was either a favored or a flattered man. If the first, she who made it was an angel; if the second, a cruel coquette. In which category should I place Cornelia Woodley?

To discover this was the object of my next remark, the rudeness of which can only be excused by the torture my suspicions were causing me.

"Not your presence, Miss Woodley," I said, "but that of one whose absence would, no doubt, cause you far greater regret than mine."

The surprise that leaped up into her great gazelle eyes was not displeasing to me. There was something in it that spoke of innocence. At least, it was not coquetry.

"Of whom do you speak, sir?"

I hesitated to give the name. I may have been wronging her. In any case I had no right to inter-

fere with her predilections. My speech had placed me in a dilemma, from which I would have been too happy to escape without further controversy. Fortunately there was a chance; by her brother at that moment reappearing, to renew his solicitations.

This time they were successful. The short conversation with his sister had caused a change in my sentiments. It had inspired me with fresh hope; under the whisperings of which I was easily persuaded to stay for the grand bear-hunt.

Next day, according to promise, Bradley brought back the horse—one of his negroes riding another.

I felt certain it was only an excuse, as the man could as well have returned the horse without him.

His own was unsaddled and stabled, which told of his intention to make a stay.

Thus brought together, we were necessarily introduced, and for the first time I exchanged speech with a man for whom I had felt an instinctive aversion.

Neither our salutes nor after-communications were cordial; but the presence of our host and his sister relieved us from the necessity of any direct conversation.

I saw that there was a black cloud upon his brow, whenever Miss Woodley appeared to take an interest in anything I said.

Once I had caught his eye turned upon me with a scowl so sullen and malignant, as almost to tempt me to take notice of it.

And yet it rather gratified me to think that he might be jealous.

The situation appeared to be irksome to all the party. Our host did not seem easy with two such ill-assorted guests, and his sister also showed signs of constraint.

Opportunately, there came a relief.

My late skiffman, Jake, who had been scouting through the woods, brought in the report that "de pigeons war in clouds after de mas', up on de ridge among de beeches."

I was the only one present who did not clearly comprehend the announcement.

It was soon explained to me. The well-known migratory birds of America—the passenger-pigeons—had arrived among some beechwood that grew upon a ridge in the rear of the plantation. There making pause in their irregular flight, they were filling their crops with the scattered mast.

Small as was the game, and tame the sport of pigeon-shooting, it is one that cannot be obtained every day, like the chase of the squirrel. The birds stay but a short time in any particular place—excepting in those grand roosts that are few and far between. Every one can not enjoy the sport of destroying them wholesale at their roosting-places; but in the autumn of the year, those who live in the neighborhood of beechen woods may have a chance to shoot them.

In a region where they but rarely show themselves, even the grand bear-hunter will not disdain to spend a day or two in popping away at pigeons.

Such a district was that in which lay the plantation of our host.

At the word "pigeons" Henry Woodley sprang to his gun, calling upon us to imitate his example.

We could not do otherwise than respond to the call, and all three started forth—our host, Bradley, and myself.

Miss Woodley was, for the time, left alone.

CHAPTER XII.

THE PERILS OF PIGEON-SHOOTING.

I DO NOT propose to give a description of pigeon-shooting, as practiced in the backwoods of the West, though the sport has its peculiarities, some of which may be worth mentioning. It is not such a slaughter as has been represented, and the vast flocks—or "clouds," as the negro had called them—would lead one to conclude. This is true enough of the breeding-roosts, where the birds, inspired by the passion of love, or acting under the instincts of generation, appear to lose all sense of fear or self-preservation.

Elsewhere, and at other times, they become sufficiently shy; and though the gunner may always get within range of a single bird, or two or three, seated upon a branch, it requires both cover and careful stalking to obtain one of those wholesale shots poured into the thick of the flock and counting its score of victims. Almost invariably, when you are just upon the edge of shot-range, some old bird, wary from the last year's experience, gives the cue to the flock, that with a loud clapping of wings flies off to some other resting-place, a hundred yards further on through the woods.

The whole "gang," however, does not obey this signal of safety. Solitary birds here and there, in twos, threes, or half-a-dozen, remain irresolute upon the branches; and if you are contented to take aim at these, you may keep loading and firing almost continuously.

For this reason they are not always pursued by shot-guns, some sportsmen preferring the rifle, these often showing the largest bag when the sport is over. They are sure of a bird to each shot, and as there are always some within range, there is no time wasted in idly following the flock.

It was so with a party whom we found on the ridge, young planters and others, who had preceded us there, having got word sooner than we of the arrival of the pigeons. Some carried shot-guns, others were provided with the rifle. Among those provided with the latter was Nat Bradley; who, as is usual with planters in riding about, had brought his gun along with him. I myself was armed with the same kind of weapon.

As in all cover-shooting, there is some danger in

this sport, especially when the party is a large one; and at a season before the leaves have fallen from the trees. Each sportsman pursues his own course, without thinking of others; and, as the birds may be either upon the ground, the wing, or perched upon the lowermost branches, guns are not always pointed to the sky. With shot flying about, and now and then the bullet of a rifle, one might be excused for feeling a little nervous.

The sport was new to me, and I did not think of this danger, until the "z-zip" of a bullet passing close to my ear, admonished me that pigeon-shooting might prove any thing but a safe pastime.

So close had the thing come, that I felt the current of air sweeping across my cheek, and turning suddenly to the tree behind me, saw the fresh score where the ball had buried itself in the bark. At the same instant I heard the "spang" of the piece that had discharged it.

My first impulse was to proceed toward the incautious sportsman, and reproach him for his carelessness. I could not tell who it was. Some low pawpaws lay between, upon one of which I supposed the pigeon had perched, which had tempted the incautious shot.

The bullet seemed to have brought down its bird, for I had turned suddenly and saw that nothing flew away. All I could see was a blue puff of smoke, soaring up over the pawpaws.

In no very amiable humor, I proceeded toward the spot, but on reaching it I found no one upon whom to discharge my spleen. Guns were cracking in other parts of the wood, and I could see men moving about at the ends of long vistas, but not the man who had come so near shooting me.

It was altogether an odd circumstance, and I stopped to reflect upon it.

Was it carelessness on the part of one of my fellow-sportsmen; who, seeing what he had done, and ashamed of it, preferred sneaking away?

I might have thought so; but then, where was the pigeon? I had thought so quickly, that I must have seen it fall, or fly away.

I saw neither!

I now reached the pawpaw thicket. I could find no bird, either dead or wounded; but, while traversing about, I picked up the "patching" of the bullet. It was a piece of dressed doekskin.

There was nothing in this to guide me to the sportsman who had used it.

I now felt a growing desire to identify him; for the longer I reflected, the more I became convinced that the shot had not been accidental.

"The bullet!" thought I; "that may serve my purpose."

I returned to the tree in which it had buried itself; and, with my knife, carefully scooped it out of the bark.

It was of an unusual size for a hunting-rifle, about twenty to the pound. This would no doubt guide me to the gun from which it had been discharged.

Though the sportsmen were scattered through the woods, I took occasion to place myself in contact first with one, then the other, until I had got a glance at the caliber of their respective guns. There were five of them exclusive of Mr. Bradley.

Of these only two had rifles, both small bores, not larger than fifty to the pound.

From Bradley's rifle then had issued the bullet I had extracted from the tree; and I now felt convinced that my own person was the "pigeon" at which it had been fired.

Without making known the circumstance, or stating my suspicions to any one, I reflected what would be best for me to do.

To charge the man with an attempt at murdering me, would seem so absurd. What motive could he have for such an atrocious act? We were perfect strangers to one another, with no quarrel between us, no circumstance to have given color to so serious an accusation. Supposing it proved to be Bradley's bullet, he would simply have to say that he fired it at a pigeon, and had not seen me. He might be reproached with negligence, but not accused of a crime, so monstrous as to appear improbable.

On the whole I thought it more prudent to keep my suspicions to myself, or communicate them only to my host on returning home.

Meanwhile I determined to make myself better acquainted with the bore of Mr. Bradley's rifle, and watch the direction in which it should be aimed. To do this it would be necessary to keep my eye upon him.

I now discovered that he was missing from among the sportsmen, nor was his gun any longer heard cracking through the woods.

Some one remarked this, and some one else added that it was not strange, as Nat Bradley cared nothing about shooting, and had likely gone home.

CHAPTER XIII.

REJECTED.

It is difficult to describe the thoughts at that moment passing through my mind, about Mr. Nat Bradley and his mysterious movements. I can well remember them as being black and bitter. More than ever was I enraged at the man, who, failing to become my assassin, appeared to be successful as my rival. I could no longer conceal from myself the deep interest I felt in Cornelia Woodley.

The disappearance of Bradley was easily explained. I did not need to hear that he had gone back to the house. It was but the echo of my own instinct, the moment he was missed from the sporting party. Miss Woodley would be alone. It was no wonder he should seek such an opportunity. No wonder either, that pigeon-shooting should no longer seem sport to me, and that I should determine on retiring from it.

Without communicating my intention to any one, I strayed from the ridge, and toward the plantation-house.

I went with irresolution, now hesitating whether I should interrupt a scene, the very thought of which maddened me, and where I would, no doubt, be deemed a most unwelcome intruder.

But the madness itself stimulated me to proceed; and on I went, like one who despairingly offers himself upon the altar of destruction.

Close to the house of Henry Woodley there was a clump of low timber, that might have been likened to an orchard. It was not this, however, only the grove of indigenous trees already mentioned, that, being of an ornamental kind, had been left standing for show and shade. A fence had been thrown around them, and some slight attempts made to give them the character of a cultivated shrubbery. Walks had been traced out, and a rustic seat or two placed at intervals among these natural arbors.

The path leading from the beechwood ridge ran through the inclosure, and upon this I was returning. There was a set of "bars" separating it from the woods behind; most of these were down, as we had left them on going out. I had stepped silently over, and was proceeding on toward the house, when voices, heard in conversation, caused me to come to a stop. There were two of them, both easily recognized. The first I heard was that of Nat Bradley, loud enough for me to make out the words, as also to tell to whom they were addressed.

I was too much interested in what was being said to feel either shame or reluctance at playing eaves-dropper.

"You've made up your mind to that?"

I was not in time to catch the beginning of the speech, which appeared to be in the form of an interrogation.

The answer proved it to have been one.

"I have," was the reply, in a female voice—like that of Miss Woodley.

"I suppose you think I'm not rich enough; you intend to marry some grand fellow with a fortune, who can show you off? That's why you refuse me."

"Permit me to tell you, Mr. Nat Bradley, it has nothing to do with my refusing you."

"Come, Corneel; speak the truth; if it be only that, I can promise you that I too—"

"You need not make promises; I have spoken the truth, and once for all I tell you, that it is no use your asking me again. I have said it once before, I now say it again; Nat Bradley, I can never be your wife."

There was an emphasis on the words that particularly pleased me.

A pause followed, and with a heart strangely palpitating, I listened for the rejoinder.

It came in an accent half-agonized, half-angry.

"You won't, Corneel? You won't! Be it so. Then, by heaven! you'll never be the wife of another man—or if you are, it will only be to become his widow. I swear by the Eternal, that if it costs me my life, I'll kill the man that marries you. Yes, the very day he makes you his bride. So now you may choose for yourself; either be my wife or some fool's widow. If I thought it was this fledgeless puppy that's staying with you, I wouldn't let it go that far. No, by—I'd put an end to him before that sun should set. I'd—"

"Nat Bradley!" broke in the voice of the indignant girl. "Do you think I will listen to such a speech as you are addressing to me? You forget yourself, sir; or you forget me. Let me hear no more of it, or my brother shall be told of the liberty you are pleased to take in his absence."

To this speech I could hear no rejoinder, but instead, a rustling of female dress, and the sound of light footsteps passing away. I could tell that Miss Woodley had put an end to the interview by retiring toward the house.

For myself I felt contented enough to have gone back to the woods, and enjoyed pigeon-shooting for the rest of the day. But the word "puppy" rung in my ears, and alongside them were my cheeks, still tingling with that queer sensation I had experienced from the passage of the bullet.

I could not restrain myself from stepping round the tree that had hitherto concealed the speakers from my sight, and confronting the only one that remained upon the ground, Mr. Nat Bradley.

Had I been my own ghost—which he supposed I was—he could not have shown more surprise. I think now, as I thought then, that he was under the belief that he had killed me—and this may account for his consternation at seeing me. At all events, the braggadocio to which he had been giving vent, seemed suddenly scared out of him; and he received me in a manner almost submissive.

"Mr. Bradley," I said, "will you have the goodness to let me look at your gun?"

"My gun!" he replied, with an air of assumed surprise. "Oh! certainly; but why do you wish to see it?"

"Because I have a bullet here, that passed within less than an inch of my skull. I'm curious to know who came so near shooting me—by accident."

"My God! I hope it wasn't me."

"Well," I replied, after placing the bullet to the muzzle of his rifle, and satisfying myself it had come from no other, "I can only say that it was you who fired the shot, and let me caution you, the next time you go pigeon-shooting, to stick to the feathered game, and not select a 'fledgeless puppy' for your mark. I hope you understand me?"

Without waiting for an answer, I turned upon the path, and once more stepping over the bars went back toward the beech-woods.

I rejoined the pigeon-shooting party with a zeal for the sport I had not hitherto felt.

No one was made the wiser of what had happened; nor did I care to communicate to my host how near

he had been to having the expense of providing a coffin for his stranger guest!

On our return to the house, we found Miss Woodley alone.

Where was Mr. Bradley? inquired her brother.

He had been there, but had taken his horse, and was gone.

Henry thought this nothing strange. He was an odd sort of fellow, was Nat Bradley, and did queer things sometimes.

I was not surprised at his unexplained departure. After that interview with the mistress of the mansion, he would not be likely soon to show himself there again.

There was little said about it, and I could see that Miss Woodley had no suspicion of my having overheard what had passed between her and her rejected suitor.

For my part, I intended to keep her secret. I was too contented at what I had heard to spoil my pleasure by divulging it, and unless Bradley himself should choose to demand explanations from me, I intended to leave the matter as it stood. Of course I could not help speculating upon what course he would take as regarded myself. Would he submit tamely to the treatment I had given him? Noted bully as he was, I might have expected a challenge, or what was more likely in that land of pseudo-chivalry, an "affair," that is, a rough fight with guns, knives and pistols. Why it had not come off upon the spot I could understand, or at all events I had conjectured. His rifle was empty, its last load having been discharged at my own person. He appeared to be unprovided with pistols—these weapons, perhaps, not being deemed appropriate for making a proposal of marriage. Unarmed, and taken by surprise by my sudden appearance, he had permitted me to depart without an encounter.

I supposed, however, it would come off sooner or later, and I waited for a communication.

But the next day passed, and there was none; and the next after, till a whole week had transpired without any word from Mr. Nat Bradley.

I made up my mind that I should hear no more of him, and concluded that in this case the bully was also a coward.

CHAPTER XIV.

A SURLY SKIPPER.

THE grand bear "battue" came off, and I participated in the sport. I enjoyed it all the more that Nat Bradley was not one of the hunters. Had he been so, I might have been mistaken for a bear, and got a bullet through my body. But he was not upon the ground, and I was saved from such apprehensions.

For a time I saw nothing more of him, as he did not come near the house. There were letters, moreover, received by my host, which I fancied were from him. I thought so from having caught sight of the messenger who carried them. He was the negro who had brought back the horse.

After reading them, my host appeared suddenly affected with low spirits. I could guess the nature of the correspondence. No doubt it related to the gambling debt of which the creditor was now spitefully claiming payment. I was happy in thinking it was no worse. For myself, I was no longer unhappy, except in the thought of parting from that pleasant companionship to which chance had introduced me.

A change had come over my sentiments. So far from seeking an excuse for hurrying away, I was now thinking of one by which I might gracefully prolong my stay. A somewhat singular one suggested itself. I became seized with the fancy to make a voyage upon a flat-boat! In this way I could glide down to New Orleans, leaving my horse to be sent by steamer.

In truth I had such a fancy, though I confess I might not have gone so far as to attempt indulging it but for the sake of the little strategy that had suggested itself. I knew that the cotton-boat was coming down from Tennessee, and was to call at the plantation. It was to bring barrels of apples, sacks of walnuts and other etceteras that do not thrive in the semi-tropical lowlands of the Mississippi. Moreover it was to take thence some packages of skins—the spoils of bucks, bears and panthers, which the hunting planter was in the habit of sending annually to New Orleans.

A week or two might elapse before the flat could be expected, and if I insisted on carrying out my caprice, I could take passage upon that.

Such was my scheme.

It succeeded, and I found a plea for prolonging that intercourse, too pleasant to be easily interrupted.

Another week elapsed—it seemed only a day—and the Tennessee flat was reported at the landing. I could have wished it upon a snag, five hundred miles up-stream.

There was no help for it. The time had come for taking departure.

The peltries of the hunting planter were sent aboard along with my own traps—these consisting of a spare suit of clothes, my chase trophies collected during my stay, and a stock of comestibles to serve me during a three-days' river voyage.

Bidding an adieu to Miss Woodley, which was not designed to be the last, I walked toward the landing, my host going along with me.

On reaching the river-bank, we found the crew of the flat engaged in getting the peltries aboard. I was a little surprised, and more than a little chagrined, to discover that the captain of the craft was no other than Mr. Black, her builder, whose uncivil behavior in Tennessee had caused me an unpleasant reminiscence. Stinger, too, was there acting as his

mate, the hands, four in number, being negroes from Squire Woodley's plantation.

The discovery caused me to repent of my design—a voyage of three hundred miles in such company did not promise much pleasure, and I regretted my rashness in having proposed it.

It was too late, however, to recede, though I was not long in discovering that the captain of the craft would have been delighted by my doing so.

Everything had been got aboard, the packages of skins, with the large case containing the souvenirs of my hunting achievements; but my personal luggage and provision-hamper still rested on the shore, presided over by the plantation dandy who had conveyed them to the landing.

The crew of the flat appeared to take no notice of these last, but were standing as if ready to draw in the plank.

"Mr. Black—I believe that is your name?" said my host, addressing himself to the *ci-devant* boat-builder—"I've brought you a passenger. I hope you'll contrive to make him comfortable on the voyage."

"A passenger!" exclaimed the man, pretending surprise, for the negroes must have told him I was coming. "There ar'n't room for a passenger, Mr. Woodley."

"Oh, nonsense! You must make room somehow or other."

"The bit o' caboose we hev air arredy crowded. Thar's me and Mr. Stinger in it, and thar's hardly room among the bales for the niggers to stretch themselves."

"You can roll two or three of the bales out upon the roof. You haven't far to take them now. By spreading a bit of tarpaulin over them, they'll get no harm."

"We hain't got no tarpaulin—neery a rag."

"Have some of my skins then; they will do admirably."

This proposal placed the captain of the flat in a dilemma. It was evident he did not wish me to proceed in his company, while at the same time he was at a loss for some reasonable objection that he might urge against my going.

What was causing his reluctance? I could not guess. Neither could the planter, who, at first surprised, soon became indignant.

"Come, Mr. Black," he said, "this boat is my father's property, and therefore in some sense mine. My friend has expressed a wish to go down upon it, and I have given him a promise he shall; I must therefore insist upon your making the arrangement I propose, and taking him. Set your men to work and roll two or three cotton-bales out upon the roof."

To this Mr. Black replied that the cotton would get spoiled, and that he'd be in trouble with the broker to whom it was consigned.

"I'll be answerable for that," was the response of the young planter.

Since I had been his guest I had not seen Henry Woodley in such a temper. He seemed to think that his character as a host was at stake, and felt the indignity of Black's behavior.

As his blood was up, I could see it would be of no use, my proposing to stay behind. Nor, indeed, had I any intention of doing so. Uninviting as was the prospect of making a three hundred miles' voyage in such surly companionship, I was now all the more determined upon it. I had originally committed myself to it as a subterfuge for prolonging my stay at the plantation, and although here was now an additional excuse, I could not creditably make use of it. To trudge back with my traps, and tell Miss Woodley the reason why, would be a humiliation I was not prepared to undergo. Sooner than do that, I would have consented to sleep *sub voce* on the roof of the flat, with only my cloak to cover me.

I was quite as indignant at the interruption as my friend—perhaps more determined that it should not stay me; and had the captain of the flat-boat held out any longer, he would have heard a little bit of my mind.

As it was, he reluctantly yielded to the remonstrances already made to him, and consented to receive me as a passenger.

It was now discovered that there would be sleeping room enough, without disturbing the cotton-bales; and my traps were taken aboard and carried into the "cabin."

An apology for what had happened on the part of the young planter—a promise on my part to revisit him in the spring—a hearty hand-shake between us, and I was aloft upon the "Father of Waters," passenger in a "flat."

CHAPTER XV.

UNSOCRABLE COMPANIONS.

Slow as was our progress, it was made slower by the eccentric action of our steersman—who, for the first six hours, was the second officer of the boat—Mr. Stinger. Instead of keeping in the current, he appeared desirous of shunning it, now hugging one shore, now shooting across and holding for a time to the other.

About five miles below the plantation we had left, he brought to against the bank, Black leaping ashore and making the hawser fast around a tree. There was no appearance of a landing, nor settlement of any kind—nothing but the wild woods.

After a whispered communication with his steersman, but without a word to me, the captain of the craft disappeared among the palmetoes, leaving his crew to the tender mercies of the musketoes.

He was absent about two hours. When he returned, and the flat was once more set free, the steersman resumed his old style of seesawing from side to side, and keeping carefully out of the current.

It might be from prudence at that particular part of the river; "snags," invisible to my inexperienced eye, might be the cause of this crooked navigation.

I could not think so; but, from the relations that existed between us, I was hindered from making inquiry, either as to that, or why Mr. Black had so long absented himself.

I addressed myself to one of the negroes, whom I remembered having seen upon the Tennessee plantation. But the dandy seemed to know no more than myself. He replied, with a puzzled expression:

"Doan' no why Mass' Stinger am a toatin' de ole boat 'bout so; I 'pose he hab some reezan. Maybe dar's danger 'bout hyar 'mong de snags an' de saw-yers."

My own explanation was different, though, as afterward proved, not any nearer the truth. I fancied that Mr. Black had made up his mind to punish me for forcing my company upon him. He would do it by making these delays and *detours*, and so playing upon my patience, drive me ashore, at Natchez, Point Coupee, or some other stopping-place for steamboats.

Had this been his design, it would have succeeded. Long before night I had become sick both of my company and quarters, and intended to escape from them at the very first landing, where I might wait for some down-river steamboat.

Indeed, the thought had been in my mind at the moment of embarking. I did not declare it, as I knew it would humiliate my late host to think that the brute Black had beaten us. Now that I was alone, there was no reason why I should continue to endure the inconvenience of such a voyage. By going ashore at Natchez, I could put an end to it, and the Woodleys need be none the wiser.

All through the afternoon the zigzagging continued, and I think we must have crossed and recrossed about a score of times. It seemed a slow way of carrying Squire Woodley's cotton crop to its destination. At the rate we were progressing it would be midwinter before our craft touched the levee of New Orleans.

When the sun set, we were not ten miles below the place of my embarkation. I conjectured this from not having seen the island where we had shot the eagle, though it was possible we might have passed without my having recognized it.

During the daylight I had contrived to kill time with my gun. Waterfowl were constantly flushing up before the boat, and land-birds flying across the river, and I amused myself by shooting them.

Now it was an osprey soaring above the stream; now a white egret or a blue heron perched upon the point of some sand-bar or sailing along upon a drift-log.

Once I got a shot at the great Mississippi crane, and brought the bird down upon the water; but as the uncivil skipper would not allow his skiff to retrieve it, I had to lose my game.

The shooting, however, proved excellent sport. Indeed, it was partly in expectation of this I had first thought of making such a voyage.

When night came on I could not continue it, and I was forced to think of some other resource for destroying the time.

There was no other. Conversation with such a crew was out of the question, and I was without books—even had it been possible to read them by the light of a dull tallow dip that burned in the hole called "caboose." I could not endure to stay in this noisome hole, in the company of four chattering negroes, who for some reason had been ordered to remain below. The two white men kept to the roof, and thither I repaired, intending to spend at least a portion of the night in the open air.

Though the day had been one of the hottest, it was now cool enough for heavy covering—the chill air of the swamp sweeping along the surface of the stream.

Unpacking my cloak, I threw it over my shoulders and closed the clasp. There was sufficient breeze to make this precaution necessary. Then igniting a cigar, I commenced pacing to and fro over the rounded roof of the ark.

I soon discovered there was not much comfort in this. The night was dark, the planking uneven, and I was in danger of stumbling overboard.

I stopped, and taking stand near the edge, bent my eyes over the broad stream, watching the fireflies as they flitted like sparks along the wooded shore, whose outlines I could barely trace through the darkness.

For a time I found distraction for my thoughts in listening to the many voices of Nature, sonorous around me. From the bank I could hear the barking of the wolf, and once or twice a catlike call which I supposed to be the cougar.

But the night-birds were more noisy, and rising above the constant "skirl" of the crickets I could distinguish the trumpet-like note of the wild swan, the "honk" of the gander, and the plaintive call of the bull-batt.

For a long time I stood listening to these mingled voices—the psalmody of Nature. There were no human sounds to hinder me from hearing them. The four negroes were below, and the two white men upon the deck were as silent as specters. I could see them standing together by the shaft of the long steering oar, which, resting upon its pivot, traversed the boat longitudinally, reaching almost from stem to stern. They appeared to converse, but in a tone so low I could not hear what they were saying.

I had placed myself as far as possible from them, having no wish to court the companionship of such an unsocial couple.

Though carried on in whispers, I noticed that their conversation was of an earnest kind. I could tell this by their attitudes. Was it about me?

Despite the obscurity that surrounded them, I could see that their faces were turned toward me. I knew that they were chafed at my having come aboard against their will, though for what reason I was still unable to guess.

Beyond the incivility which they had already shown in every possible way, I expected nothing more. It seemed too ridiculous to apprehend danger.

And yet, at that moment, something of the kind stole into my thoughts. I had heard enough of these Mississippi boatmen to believe them capable of any thing—even of committing murder.

But why should these men murder me? My baggage was not big enough; and they had no reason to believe I carried money upon my person, in a sum sufficient to tempt them to such a crime.

Besides, there were the negroes, Squire Woodley's own slaves; such an attempt could not be made without their knowing of it. The thought was preposterous; and I dismissed it from my mind as soon as conceived.

And still I could not make out why the two men were talking so earnestly. Their gestures, too, which I could just discern through the dim light, admonished me that some strange circumstance was being discussed between them. It could not be the guiding of the boat. Ever since nightfall they had ceased "quarterming" the stream. The steering-oar was at rest, and the flat was gliding smoothly on, at the rate of four miles to the hour—the current at this place being unusually rapid. It could not be that.

By this time my cigar had nearly burnt out. Groping for another, I discovered I had left my case in the cabin. In going to get it, I passed close to where the two men were standing. Black had hold of the oar-handle, while Stinger was lounging at his elbow.

I had the cigar-stump still in my teeth—the remains of a good Havana, with a red coal at the end of it. I was curious to have a look at the fellows, and passing close to them, I increased the luminosity of the cigar by giving it a strong puff or two.

Never had such a faint light shone upon two more ill-favored faces. Both appeared distorted by some passion of a criminal kind; and, could I have imagined any motive for their murdering me, I might have believed at that moment, that such was their intention!

CHAPTER XVI.

A MAN OVERBOARD.

On descending into the "caboose," I found the four negroes stretched out and snoring. They had worked hard at the steering-oar while making these eccentric traverses, which even they did not understand. Poor wretches! had they known what was in store for them, they would not have gone to sleep. Even fatigue could not have overcome them.

The dip was burning dimly, and by its light I had some difficulty in finding my cigar-case. I laid my hands upon it at length, and drawing forth a fresh weed, kindled it at the cumulus of smoking wick.

For a moment I hesitated as to whether I should return to the roof, or take my seat upon a chest that formed part of the furniture of the cabin.

The stench decided me. The odor of greasy cooking-utensils, combined with that emanating from the shirts of four sweating Africans, was too powerful to be put down by the perfume of the best Havana, and I preferred returning to the roof.

As I ascended the steps, I heard a scrambling above me, as if the two men were struggling with the steering-oar.

I could not guess what it meant, and was all the more surprised at seeing them—as soon as the darkness permitted—exactly in the same spot where I had left them. Black was still grasping the handle of the oar, Stinger standing at his elbow.

I was about passing on to the stem, and had got between them and the beam, when I heard the former exclaim: "H—I-fire! we'll be on a snag!"

At the same instant I saw him rush toward me, pressing the oar in front of him.

Before I had time to get out of the way, the huge piece of timber struck me in the ribs; and but that I had caught hold of it, I should have been precipitated into the water.

My hold did not avail me, nor was it the intention of that ruffian steersman that it should.

"Let go!" he cried. "Let go, d—n ye, or ye'll have us on the snag!"

As he spoke I saw his right hand raised from the oar, and then descending toward me. By the light of my cigar, still between my teeth, I saw the gleaming of steel. At the same time I felt a stinging sensation in my shoulder, the arm seemed to become suddenly paralyzed, my grasp became relaxed, and I fell back downward into the river!

For a second or two my cloak sustained me, but before I could turn upon my face and strike out to swim, the huge ark swept over me, sending me far below the surface. A loud drumming in my ears, a choking sensation in my throat—the sensation of drowning.

I came again to the surface, but without any clear idea of where I was, or what had happened me. It appeared like a horrible dream from which I was not yet awakened.

Soon my senses returned; I remembered having fallen from the flat; and then, that I had been pushed from it; and then, how I had struggled to save myself from going over; and then, why I had not succeeded.

During this process of thought, I was kept above water less by my own efforts, than by the cloak that covered my shoulders, and the rapid current that carried me along. But for these I might have gone back to the bottom, never more to rise. On attempting to swim, I found that my right arm was of no use to me.

I looked around for the flat, though without any design to recover footing upon it. It was no longer near me, nor in sight. Carried swiftly on by the current, it had disappeared in the darkness.

I did not shout to make known my situation. I had sufficiently recovered my senses to know that on board the boat there might be as much danger to me as in the water; perhaps more. And I preferred trusting to the stream.

Working the cloak to the right side, so as to leave my left arm free, I struck out with it; not to swim, but simply to keep my head above water. In this way, I glided on with the current.

I could not have kept long afloat. I felt I was each moment growing feebler; and with the utmost difficulty could save myself from sinking.

The surging current carried me along, but not toward the bank. I saw no bank; for that matter, I might as well have been in the middle of the ocean.

Even had the shore been in sight, I could have done nothing to approach it. I could have made no effort beyond that I was making—just sufficient to sustain myself on the surface.

I should soon sink. I began to feel certain of it—to contemplate it with a sort of resignation. Quicker than the changes of a kaleidoscope, the scenes of my past life came before me. Father, mother, sisters, and brothers, were all at that moment remembered, and she whom I had late left. Oh! it was agony to think I should never see her again.

While giving way to this despairing thought, something struck me from behind. I felt some hard substance pressing against my thigh. It caused a thrill through my flesh, for it was a contact unexplained and unnatural. I could think only of one thing—the snout of an alligator! I knew that I was now in that part of the Mississippi where this hideous saurian held his midnight revels.

Instinctively I increased my speed, but to no purpose; the bony proboscis still rubbed against my thigh. In another moment I should feel the huge jaws harshly closing upon and crushing it like a reed!

With an effort I turned round, to meet the monster face to face. In this way I preferred perishing.

In another moment I lay with my left arm clasped around it, embracing it as I might my dearest friend, as if it had been—

What I had mistaken for an ugly alligator, was a floating tree-trunk; like myself rudely flung upon the flood, but with a buoyancy far surpassing mine.

The log proved light enough to sustain not only itself, but faint, sinking me; and straddling it longitudinally, I gave myself up to the current with a gratitude to God, whose hand, I could not help thinking, had been stretched out to preserve me!

After that, I became unconscious.

CHAPTER XVII.

ADRIFT.

My unconsciousness resembled sleep. It was not that, but syncope. I had fainted through exhaustion.

Fortunately the cloak, still upon my shoulders, clung around the tree-trunk, and hindered me from slipping off. Otherwise I might have gone to the bottom without knowing it.

My syncope was of short duration, though how long I could not tell. I could guess at the time afterward from knowing the distance I must have drifted.

I awoke to find myself lying upon the log. It was afloat, as I could tell by its motion underneath me; and I supposed myself drifting down-stream.

As my senses became clearer I perceived that this was not the case. Although the log bobbed about, as I stirred upon it, I now saw that it was close to the bank, and held as if by a hawser.

It was dark all around me, darker than ever; but I could see that I was under the shadow of trees, whose moss-covered arms stretched out over the stream. The gleaming of fire-flies upon the bank above gave me no aid in reconnoitering the situation. Their false, fitful light only misled me.

After a time I discovered the cause of my having come to; and even recognized the spot. It was the same where I had made landing from the skiff, while eagle-shooting on the island.

There was the huge fallen cypress with its roots upon the bank and trunk slanting down into the river. Despite the darkness and the confusion of my ideas, I remembered it.

I was still lying along the log, having as yet made no attempt to leave it. I felt too weak for the effort. Fortunately that it was so; for soon after I discovered the singular manner in which I was moored. The skirt of my cloak, trailing upon the water, had caught in a snag of the cypress, and held fast. As the garment was also hooked to the log on which I lay, the latter had been arrested in its course, and turned round under the shelter of the tree, where the current ceased to act upon it. Had I started suddenly up, or made any incautious movement, I might have detached the chance fastening and gone adrift again, to be carried God knows whither. Perceiving this danger, I took my measures accordingly.

Gently hauling upon the hawser of soaked broadcloth, I succeeded in grasping one of the branches of the cypress, and drawing the log close to its trunk, I was enabled to crawl from one to the other.

I did not accomplish this without an effort; I had but one arm to work with, the left. My right hung useless by my side.

Scrambling along the slanting trunk, I got up to the level of the bank, and then dropping off, I staggered a step or two through the palmettoes, and fell prostrate to the earth.

For a time I felt utterly unable to recover my feet.

I wondered at my weakness, and could not account for it. The mere fatigue could not have caused it. I knew that I was wounded. My helpless arm, and the pain in my shoulder, told me that I had received a stab; I had seen the knife that had given it; but in the darkness I did not know that most of the moisture bathing my body was my own blood. This it was that had so utterly enfeebled me.

I had just strength left to take off my coat, grope for the wound—though it was easily found—and bind it up in strips torn from my dripping shirt.

After that I fell back into a recumbent attitude. I could sustain myself in no other.

But for the discomfort caused by my wet clothes I could have gone to sleep, for I felt deathlike drowsy. Every thread was saturated, and, with only one arm, I could not wring them out. I succeeded, however, in expelling most of the water from my cloak, by pressing it with my feet against the trunk of a tree, and then spreading it over me, I lay swathed in dampness.

The night was not cold. It had been chilly only in the breeze of the river. Under the shelter of the trees there was not a breath stirring; and with the heat of my body I was soon surrounded by an atmosphere resembling a vapor-bath.

Soothed by its warmth, my drowsiness increased, and I gradually sunk into a slumber.

It was not sound nor natural, only the slumber of exhaustion. I awoke at intervals to a sort of half-consciousness, scarce knowing whether I was sleeping or waking.

Once I was aroused to a clearer comprehension. It was a sound that startled me. It appeared to be a shot, instantly followed by a shriek, like the cry of some one in extreme agony!

I thought there were voices afterward; and I lay for a long while listening, but I could hear only the constant "skirl" of the grasshoppers and tree-toads, with now and then the "glucking" of the great swamp-frog, and the hoot of the horned owl. The shot and the shriek may have been only a fancy—the dream of a disordered brain. I tried to think so, but could not. I had heard the first through my sleep; but the second rung in my awakened ear, as also the voices that succeeded it. I could not bring myself to believe that I had not actually heard them.

I did not think of connecting these sounds with what had occurred to me on the flat. By that time Mr. Black and his boat would be miles away—far out of my hearing. I knew that some hours had passed since I had been pushed overboard. The boat going in the center current would have forged far ahead of me and my floating log. Besides I had now been some time on the island.

I lay reflecting on what had occurred. Though unable to account for the conduct of the ruffian, I did not attribute it to any deep design. I had simply crossed him in some whim, and I knew that for even so slight a cause life is often sacrificed on the Mississippi.

What design could he have in killing me? I could not think of any, not even a motive.

Kept awake by the stinging pain of my wound, I continued to reflect. I remembered the strange behavior of the skiffman Jake, and the statement he had made about strange sounds heard upon the island—"de debil's island," as he called it. There appeared to be some truth at the bottom of what I had ridiculed as a superstition!

I slept no more for the remainder of that night. I was filled with horrid fear; and with joy I hailed the first gray glimmer of the moon, as it came slowly stealing through the festoons of Spanish moss that curtained my ungrateful couch.

CHAPTER XVIII.

ILL-OMENED SOUNDS.

WITH the sun fairly up, my strength had to some degree returned. I was still feeble as a child, but able to stand upon my feet.

My first care was to quench my thirst. It is always so with those severely wounded, especially where there has been much loss of blood.

Though near me there was water sufficient to have surfeited the whole human race, I had some difficulty in drinking of it. It was only accessible by means of the sloping tree-trunk. I succeeded in crawling down this, and satisfying the appetite that distressed me.

Returning to the bank, I bethought me of the next move to be made; which, of course, was how I should get off the island. I did not spend much time in speculating about this. My eagle-shooting excursion was still fresh in my remembrance, and along with it the lagoon to which it had led me in the chase of the wounded bird, with the old dug-out I had seen under the cypress.

"How fortunate," I thought, "there is such a chance of getting off! Otherwise I might remain on this island heaven knows how long. It might be days before any boat would come past, near enough to be hailed, and with nothing to eat."

So ran my reflections, as I gathered up my cloak, now nearly dry, slung it scarf-like over my shoulder, and with a staggering step set forth in the direction of the dug-out.

My course was far from being direct; I had but a slight recollection of my former traces, which, of themselves, had been sufficiently eccentric. I was again going by guess, and now slowly, faint, and tottering in my steps.

More by chance than by guidance, they conducted me to the deadwood where I had discovered the eagle's nest. As I came into the opening under it, I was saluted by the screams of the bereaved birds—all three of which, startled by my approach, circled in the air above. I could not help thinking they recognized me, and that their screams were in retaliation,

tion, to mock my misfortune. I hastened on, looking for the lagoon.

From the deadwood I could proceed directly. I had twice traversed the ground, and remembered the trace. Sure of my direction, I walked on more calmly, and soon came in sight of the sunflash that shot down through the break caused by the lagoon.

At the same moment I came suddenly to a stop—at the sound of human voices.

They were not loud, but heard only in low murmuring, as of men engaged in earnest conversation. The speakers were evidently by the edge of the lagoon, to which I was tending.

"How fortunate," thought I, "to find people upon the island. Some hunters, perhaps?"

I should get off without the necessity of having to take the old dug-out, about the management of which, with my disabled arm, I had misgivings.

While thus congratulating myself, one of the voices was raised a little louder—just then giving vent to an exclamation. I recognized the voice. It was the same that had sworn at me the night before as I clung to the steering-oar. It had been ever since ringing in my ears. It was the voice of the boatman, Black.

My first feeling was of extreme surprise. What could the flat-boat captain be doing on the island? And was his craft there too? It might be. The sounds reached me direct from the lagoon. The boat might be in it.

Listening, I again heard the voices, mingling with the tread of heavy boots, as of men hurrying to and fro over hollow planking. Beyond doubt the boat was in the bayou!

What was it doing there? Had it met with an accident, and been taken to the lagoon for safety and repair? I had heard that the river current was at that point especially dangerous, and this suggested the thought.

It never occurred to me that they had brought to on my account. I could not suppose this. I was certain as I lived they intended taking my life, and were under the impression that they had succeeded. Had Black merely pushed me overboard, I might have had doubts; but the thrust of the knife, and the fierce exclamation that accompanied it left no uncertainty as to his intention.

And now, recalling this, my first feeling of surprise gave way to one of alarm. Whatever cause of hostility these ruffians had against me would still exist. Moreover, their design of taking my life would now be strengthened by an instinct for their own preservation. Seeing that I still lived, they would know that their attempt at assassination could not go altogether unpunished, despite the lawlessness of the land in which they lived.

In that remote and solitary place, unseen by human eyes save their own, they might renew it, with every chance of success, considering my crippled condition.

True, there would be negroes, whose presence in the daylight might restrain them. But I was not sure of this. They might find some means of getting the black men out of the way; and I knew that, even if eye-witnesses of the most fearful crime, the testimony of the slave is often controlled by the fear of the torturing cowskin. They could order the four men below, as they had done before, and then do with me as they pleased, drag me to a distance among the trees, and murder me at their leisure. I felt too feeble to make the slightest resistance.

These conjectures passed through my mind in less time than I have taken to state them; and under a horrid apprehension, I not only hesitated to advance, but feared to retreat, lest the rustling of the leaves might betray my presence.

For some minutes I remained thus irresolute, when it occurred to me that some one might stray out among the trees and discover me. A giant cypress stood near me, whose huge buttresses, surrounded by "knees" about my own height, offered an excellent place for concealment; and gliding silently into one of its dark niches, I took stand, cowering like a fugitive, who feels that the ruthless pursuer is upon his track and close to his hiding-place.

For some time I remained a prey to horrid apprehensions. After my experience of the previous night, I was justified in having them.

They were keen enough to keep me quiet. I made no more noise than was caused by my quick breathing.

For nearly an hour I stood in my "stall," between the two broad buttresses of the cypress, considering what I should do. I was still irresolute about retreating. The whole surface of the island was covered with palmettoes, whose stiff, fan-like fronds made a loud rustling when touched. I could not pass through them without risk of being heard. Why I had not been discovered while making my approach was probably because the boatmen were busy about some matter that engrossed their attention. They were very near me—not thirty yards off, and but for the underwood I should have been certainly seen. If caught retreating, I should have given them the very opportunity they would desire—that is, if they meant to murder me.

Besides, I could think of no way by which I was to get off the island. I should gladly have gone back to the craft that had conveyed me thither, the drift-log, and once more trusted myself to the current. But I remembered that, on leaving it, it had become disintegrated from the cypress, and resumed its course down the river. Even this waif was no longer available.

My next thought was to steal back to the side from which I had come, watch for some passing boat, hail her to bring to and take me off. But I knew there would be but little hope in this. I had reason to believe that the boats did not pass on that side. Though there the channel was wider, it

was not so safe, and both steamers and flats kept to the other. I knew nothing of how the land lay, and I was apprehensive that by proceeding to make an exploration, I should be seen by the assassins of the flat. Even should a steamboat appear, I dared not hail with my voice, and any signal I should make would scarce be regarded.

My thoughts once more reverted to the dug-out. It was not likely the old craft would be disturbed by the crew of the cotton-boat, who had their skiff for a tender.

Concealed as the canoe was, under the fronds of the palmettoes, it might even escape their notice. I could wait till they took their departure, and then avail myself of it, to get off from the island. This, at length, became my determination.

I only hoped I should not be long detained; though I could form no idea of what was causing the detention of the cotton-boat. It did not appear to be an accident.

There was no sound of saw, or hammers, or anything like making repairs—only the hum of voices, with the trampling and huffing of feet.

I listened to make out what was said, but could not. The conversation appeared to be carried on in a low tone, as if under restraint. There were three voices taking part in the talk, but Black's was the only one I could recognize. A second, I thought, was Stinger's; but the man was of a taciturn habit, and I only heard it at long intervals. The third was unknown to me.

Nor was any of them the voice of a negro. This I thought strange. Actively engaged as they appeared to be, if there were darkies employed at the work their silence was inexplicable. I heard neither their chattering nor jocund cacklings.

After a time a fourth voice fell upon my ear, and in a tone that seemed to direct, or command. I was startled to think it was that of the planter, Bradley.

I listened more attentively than ever, straining my ears to their utmost. I could hear nothing but sound—the low humming of human voices, deadened in its passage through the thick shrubbery, and at intervals drowned by the shrieking of the grasshoppers. For all this I could tell that there were four voices, one of them I was almost certain being that of Bradley.

It was with something more than curiosity that I interrogated myself as to what he could be doing there. I could only answer by conjecture. At first it seemed very strange. But then, I remembered that Bradley's plantation was not far off. Perhaps an accident had happened to the boat, he had been apprised of it, and come to render assistance!

This conjecture was natural enough, and, but for other circumstances, might have satisfied me. It did not, and I continued to seek for some other explanation. If I could only get sight of the speakers, this might be obtained. But I could not without danger of exposing myself to their view. I might hear what they were saying by making a nearer approach, but this would be equally perilous.

All at once it occurred to me that I might accomplish my object by climbing up into the cypress. The sounds would be carried upward, and in the tree-top I might understand the talk going on in the lagoon. I saw that the ascent would be easy. One of the buttresses offered a slanting ridge, not much more difficult to scale than the rounds of a ladder; and by this I clambered into the tree.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SINGULAR PROCEEDING.

ONCE among the branches, I felt myself safe from being seen. The streamers of Spanish moss formed a festoonery around me thick enough to have concealed an elephant. By keeping quiet there would be no danger of my being detected, and I kept as still as a man may be expected to who believes his life depends upon so slight a thing as the swishing of a leaf, or the snapping of a twig.

I had not been twenty minutes on my perch before becoming convinced that *my life* hung upon just such a thread.

This conviction came not of any thing I heard; for still, as below, I could only make out the murmur of the men's voices; but I was now able to get sight of themselves.

One of the largest limbs of the cypress extended toward the lagoon, beyond which was an open list communicating with that over the water. By creeping along this branch I believed I should have a view, not only of the bayou, but of the boat.

With only one hand to help me, it seemed a difficult task, but under the stimulus of something more than curiosity I attempted it. I succeeded.

The bayou, the boat, the crew, came under my eyes.

Not the crew as I had noted it when taking my departure from Henry Woodley's plantation, for the four negroes were not seen. I saw only white men.

There were three of them. Two were Black and his confederate, Stinger. The other, a man unknown to me, but whose physiognomy and general appearance rendered him a fit associate for the two already named.

All these appeared as busy as bees, though not occupied in the same manner. I first saw Stinger, who was engaged on that end of the flat where the steps led down into the caboose. He was scrubbing the roof-boards and apparently, also, the slips, with a brush in hand and a bucket standing beside him.

Crawling a little further along the branch, the other two came in sight. There was a staging from the flat to the shore. It sloped down to the bottom of a sort of doorway in the side of the boat. I could see that a half-score cotton-bales had been rolled across it, and lay upon the land. Among these

Black, in his shirt sleeves, and the strange man, were busy.

The flat, after all, had met with an accident, and they were unloading to prevent it from sinking. This was my first impression, and I began to think there *had* been a snag, and in some way or other I had been mistaken about the whole business.

I no longer wondered at the boat having been brought up the bayou. I only wondered at not seeing the negroes. There was not one of them visible. They might be inside the boat, assisting to get out the cotton. But then I should have heard their voices, or some noise they must necessarily have made, and there was none. Where could they be?

I had not been long looking on before I discovered that Black and his assistant were engaged in an operation that quite mystified me. As I have said, they were busy among the cotton-bales. With inquiring eyes I watched their proceedings. I saw the two take hold of a bale, unloose the ropes that bound it, rip off the "bagging" from one of its sides, and then stitch in its place another piece, after which the binding cords were readjusted.

For some time I was puzzled by this singular proceeding, and it was only after a prolonged scrutiny that I could conjecture what it meant. At length, however, I arrived at the elucidation, strange and improbable as it appeared.

I observed that the pieces of canvas removed were from the sides that carried the plantation-mark and the name of the owner. I could make out the word "Woodley." On those that replaced them, which appeared in other respects precisely similar, I saw that there was a different mark, and a different name. In the large black lettering I could read: "N. BRADLEY."

Up to this moment all had been conjecture. It was no longer. The scheme became revealed to me, as by a flash of sudden sinister light. From my perch in the cypress tree I was looking upon a scene of piracy such as I had heard was far from being rare upon the Mississippi river.

The transaction was clear. The planter-pirates had taken possession of the cotton-boat, and were making their plunder presentable for safe sale. That Bradley was at the back of it I had no doubt. His name going upon the bales proved his participation and something more—the chief of the gang. He was not there himself, but I felt certain that he had been but a few minutes before. I could almost have sworn to hearing his voice, and that, too, giving directions to the others.

But how had the capture been effected? My thoughts now reverted to the negroes, who had composed the crew. With increased interest, I again looked to see if they were upon the boat. If so they must be hidden somewhere and holding themselves unusually silent.

My eyes wandered to the hatchway of the little cabin, in which I had seen them asleep. Were they asleep still, or in the slumber of death?

My blood ran cold at the horrid suspicion—colder as I thought of its probability.

There was no sign of any negro. Stinger was alone seen by the steps of the caboose, still occupied with his scrubbing-brush.

My attention now became particularly directed to this man. What could be his object in washing the rough planks forming the roof of a flat-boat? Of what was he cleansing them? And why with such care? for he was down upon his knees, devoting himself to the task with apparent earnestness.

In seeking an explanation, my eye rested upon the "suds" chased to and fro before his brush. I saw that they were of a crimson color, tinged as if with blood! I saw this with astonishment, with trembling. I remembered what I had heard in the night—that I had believed to be a dream—the shot, and the shriek that succeeded.

Had both been real? Had murder been committed? And was Stinger engaged in eliminating its traces?

The blacks were no longer upon the boat. Where were they? Was it their blood I saw, and were their bodies at the bottom of the lagoon?

Horrid as were these suspicions, I could not help having them; and the thought that they were true gradually becoming a conviction, kept me quiet in the tree.

CHAPTER XX.

A SPELL OF PADDLING.

I REMAINED silent on the limb of the cypress. Even the irksomeness of my seat did not tempt me to descend.

I was now sensible of being in a position of real peril. The men were murderers—all four of them—and one more crime would be lightly added to their last. Taking my life would be a step necessary for their own safety, and I knew that if discovered I might expect but a short shrift of it. It needed nothing more to secure my silence.

I did not design remaining there forever, only until night. Then I should descend, make my way to the dug-out, which I hoped to find in its place, and, favored by this and the darkness, slip silently out of the lagoon into the open river. This was the plan traced out.

As nothing could be done before night, I summoned all my patience to await it. And all of it was called into play. Never in my life do I remember having spent what appeared a longer day. I thought it would have no end—that the sun was never to set. It was still early when I arrived at the foot of the cypress, for I had started by the first light to go toward the lagoon.

The time at first did not hang so heavily on my hands. I was furnished with a sort of melancholy entertainment in watching the movements of the three ruffians upon the flat. I still tried to catch

their conversation, though it was no longer needed to elucidate the transaction in which they were engaged.

In this I was unsuccessful as ever. Though at times talking with apparent earnestness, they kept to a low key, as if themselves fearful of being overheard. No wonder they should, considering the work in which they were engaged.

I became wearied watching them, and soon after lost sight of them altogether.

After the bales that had been rolled out upon the bank were treated as described, all three—Stinger having completed his task of purification—entered inside the ark, and for several hours I saw no more of them.

I could guess, however, how they were engaged. The bringing ashore only the odd bales had been to make room for operations inside, where I had no doubt that the whole cargo was receiving the Bradley brand.

The quickness with which they appeared to execute their work of unroping, stitching and retying, told that it was not the first time of their having been similarly employed; and the pieces of old canvas strewn about the place, and which I had noticed on my former visit to the island, were now recalled to my recollection. In that solitary spot more than one shipment of cotton had changed its plantation-mark.

I could now understand what had appeared to puzzle his acquaintances—how Mr. Nat Bradley had so rapidly prospered on his new plantation. His boast of being able to make two bales in Mississippi for one in Tennessee I could no longer look upon as an idle vaunt. Under my eyes was the explanation.

It was a long, tedious, terrible vigil. Astride the limb of a tree, hungry, athirst, smarting under the pulsations of a fevered wound, a prey to apprehensions that by some sinister chance I might be discovered in my place of concealment, I thought that the day would never come to an end. And even when it should end, what certainty had I of being able to make good my escape? The dug-out on which I was placing my dependence might be no longer there, or if it was, I might not succeed in starting it from its moorings? I might be detected in attempting to pass the flat, which lay between the canoe and the narrow creek that communicated with the river.

Besides these, there were other probable contingencies—scores of them—to distress and keep me in constant apprehension, and in this state I passed the remainder of the day.

Just as the twilight gloom was beginning to darken over the island, I saw something to cheer me. I saw the three men come forth out of the cavernous opening in the side of the ark, each carrying an armful of spoiled canvas, which I recognized as the cast sides of the cotton bales. I saw them make these up into a huge bundle, load it with heavy mud, tie a rope round the whole mass, and fling it into the lagoon, where, like a stone, it sunk to the bottom! After this, the odd bales were rolled aboard, the staging drawn in, the hatch-door shut to, and the huge ark, yielding to a pair of oars, passed slowly and silently from my sight!

As soon as sure that they were gone for good, I descended from the tree, and waiting till the darkness had come down, I groped my way toward the place where I remembered having seen the dug-out.

I was not disappointed. I found the old craft still resting neglected upon the water, either not seen, or not cared for, by the pirates, who had passed away.

Getting quietly aboard, and arming myself with the paddle, I unloosed the fastening of twisted vines and pushed on toward the river, which I reached without hearing or seeing any one.

Fortunately, the night was a dark one, like that which preceded it. I was further favored by a thick fog that had come on after sunset.

Once out in the river I had no difficulty about the direction. The current guided me, and setting the stern of the canoe straight against it, I plied the paddle with all the strength I could command.

I took good care to dip the blade lightly, so as to make no noise in the water. The flat might still be within earshot. It might have been brought to for some purpose, alongside that island plantation, which I now knew to be the property of a pirate, and by the border of which I was now slowly feeling my way. The chill fog seemed to have quieted the night-chanters of the forest, and a slight sound could be heard far off. The stroke of the paddle might reach the ears of the pirates and prompt them to follow me in their skiff that served as a tender to the cotton-boat.

I knew that they could easily overtake me, in which case I might count upon certain death. They would recognize the dug-out and know whence I had taken it.

For the first mile or so I made but a snail's progress. With only one hand to work with, and it the wrong one, I had great difficulty in keeping the canoe stern on to the stream. Several times it came round broadside to the current, causing me to lose way before I could again get it headed in the right direction.

As I began to feel more confident that there was no pursuit, I also became more adroit in the management of the craft. Further up, too, the current was not so rapid, and I had less fear about dipping my oar-blade into the water.

Still I was not free from apprehension, and I moved on as silently as ever, at intervals suspending my stroke and listening to catch any sound from below.

Once I fancied I heard the plunge of oars close behind me, and in fear I gazed into the thick fog, thinking I should see the pursuing skiff. I listened intently for the plash of an oar-blade or the murmur of human voices.

I heard neither. I must have mistaken the sound that had reached me. It may have been caused by an alligator floundering through the flood or some drift-tree turned suddenly over by the current.

Though still necessarily slow, my progress improved as I got further away from that place of horror—the Devil's Island. But I was not easy in my mind until by the earliest break of day I saw before me an open spot on the bank, which I recognized as the landing of Henry Woodley's plantation. There was no house near it, no erection of any kind. Only some cords of firewood upon the bank, intended for the supply of such passing steamboats as chose to put in for it. It was part of the industrial resources of the plantation.

The house stood a full half-mile from the river's edge, screened from view by the cottonwood forest.

At that early hour, I did not expect to see any one at the landing. I hoped not, as I did not myself wish to be seen. I had begun to reflect on the future, more than the past, on the punishment of these murdering pirates, and the mode of bringing it about.

I knew that in such a lawless land justice might not be so easily obtained, and that despite the proofs I had, stratagem would still have to be resorted to. At all events, it would be as well that none of the plantation negroes should know of my return until I had first placed myself in communication with their master.

With the view of making my approach unobserved, I clung close along the bank, and came to at some distance below the landing-place.

Drawing the dug-out up under some branches that overhung the bank, I made it secure, at the same time that it was concealed from view. I did not intend that the old craft should drift down-stream and perhaps tell a tale to the pirates below.

CHAPTER XXI.

A TERRIFIED DARKY.

ONCE safely ashore, I walked silently through the underwood in the direction of the landing.

There was no one there, nothing but the parallelipedons of cottonwood piled up in readiness for the firemen.

The question now arose how I was to get to the house—how to get inside it—without being seen by the negroes of the plantation. I knew that they were up, and stirring about the place. I could hear the murmur of their voices, with now and then the louder baying of a hound. Of course I could not approach the dwelling without being observed—much less get inside of it.

My plight, too! My crippled arm which I carried slung in the silk scarf taken from my neck, with my coat hanging loose on my left shoulder. It was true that all this could be concealed under my cloak, but the cloak itself, and the trousers underneath, were embrowned by the muddy water. In short, my whole person presented such an appearance as to have puzzled an intimate friend in identifying me.

While reflecting on what to do, I heard footsteps coming from the direction of the house. They were made known to me by the rustling of the dry leaves with which the wood-road was thickly covered.

The footfall was flat and heavy, evidently that of a negro.

Soon after I saw the negro himself. It was Jake.

With joy I recognized him—the very man I wanted to see. I could take the old skiffman into my confidence, and by him send a message to his master, to come out to me in the woods. This was the course to be pursued. Jake had not yet discovered me. I did not intend that he should, until I had taken steps to be secure against his retreat. Were I to appear to him before he had got fairly upon the ground, he might mistake me for something else than I was, perhaps the spirit of that haunted island, from which I had truly come. In by enfeebled state, he could easily outrun me, and by reaching the house before me, spoil my plans of secrecy. Jake must be captured by stratagem.

Crouching behind one of the cords of firewood, I waited for him to advance. I could see that he was *en route* for the landing, perhaps to embark in the skiff, which was moored in its usual place.

He passed on without suspecting my presence.

He did not go down to the skiff, but out to a projecting point, upon which the steamboats usually rested their staging-plank.

There he stopped, and looked up the river, as if expecting a boat to come down.

His back was toward me, as I stepped from my place of concealment.

"Jake!" I said, "look this way!"

He turned suddenly, and I now saw that my precaution had not been an idle one. But for having him in a sort of peninsula, myself occupying the isthmus, he would certainly have made good his escape. As it was, he seemed half determined on rushing past me, and reaching the house. He even cast his eyes toward the skiff to see if there was any chance of retreating in that direction.

"Jake!" I said, in a reassuring voice. "What's the matter with you? Don't you know me?"

"Goramity, mass'r!" he gasped out, at length recognizing the man he had so often guided through the swamps. "Wha—wha—wha's comed oba you? Lor! a-mercy! You's all kivered oba wif mud, like a drown rat ob de ribba! 'Splain you'self, mass'r. What de ole debbil hab been a-happen to ye?"

"Never mind, my good fellow. I have no time for explanations. I want to see your master."

"Come on den. He ar'n't up yet; but he soon rouse out for you."

"No—no. I want to see him *down here*."

"Down hya!" echoed the darky, with a look of increased astonishment. "A'n't you comin' up to de big house, to get um washed, an' hab ya close bruss'd, an' eat ya breakfast?"

"No—not just yet, not till I've seen your master. And look here, Jake! I don't want any one to know that I am here except your master. You must tell him to come down without delay, and without any one suspecting that you went back to the house on that errand. Put this in your pocket, and let me see that you carry my message discreetly."

In the attempt to murder me I had not been robbed; and I was able to sharpen the zeal, also the intelligence, of my intended messenger by the *douceur* of a dollar. I gave it less for this, than to impress him with the importance of the errand, and so secure greater caution in its accomplishment.

With some additional instructions I dismissed him; and taking seat upon a log under cover of some underwood, I awaited the coming of Henry Woodley.

I little expected that before seeing him, I should shake hands with his brother Walter. Yet such was the reality!

While sitting upon the log reflecting how much of my story should be told to my late host, and how much for the time kept back, I heard the deep, sonorous bark that announces the "high pressure" steamboat. Looking up the river I saw the boat itself, rounding a sharp bend a little way above the landing.

When nearly opposite, her pilot-bell rung, her paddles ceased to move, and she lay to under hissing steam.

Presently a yawl with three men in it, shot out from her stern—two of them rowing, the third evidently a passenger.

I had scarce time to think who it might be, when the bow of the row-boat struck against the bank, and the passenger stepped ashore, carrying a carpet-bag along with him. I recognized the young Tennesseean cotton-planter, Walter Woodley.

He did not so easily recognize me, and when he at length discovered who was the mud-bedaubed individual that saluted him, I need scarce say that his astonishment was extreme.

His story was easily told. He was on his way to New Orleans to look after the disposal of his cotton-crop; and was merely making stop to see his sister and brother, intending to go on by the next boat.

My tale being more complicated was reserved for a later occasion—until the two brothers could have it at one hearing.

It was not long before we saw Henry, hurrying from the house; Jake following at a respectful distance behind him.

The Mississippian was less surprised at seeing his brother than me. He had heard the stoppage signal of the steamer. Walter had been expected to come that day. It was for this the old skiffman had sauntered down to the landing—to see if there were any signs of the boat.

Only Jake himself was in attendance upon Henry. The negro had shown intelligence in the accomplishment of his mission.

By my appearance, Henry Woodley was still more astonished than his brother had been. He had more lately seen me in a different guise. But mingling with his astonishment, he had the suspicions of a sinister cause, arising from antecedents he could remember. Though he could see that something serious had occurred, he did not question me then. He waited till we should get to the house.

About this there was still the same difficulty. I assured him that the servants must not see me. I had my reasons, which I promised to explain afterward.

Both the brothers still wondering, Walter suggested a way. A change of clothes and hat; in short, a disguise. He had his own cloak over his arm, with other apparel in his portmanteau.

Mine to be rolled up, and carried as a parcel by Jake, who was in the secret. My pantaloons to be tucked inside the tops of my boots. A little mud was not remarkable upon the banks of the Mississippi.

Our host would precede us to the house; and on some pretense order the domestics out of the way, so that I might enter unobserved; or, if seen, no one would think otherwise than that I was some stranger, who had come ashore along with their master's brother.

The plan was feasible enough; but even had it been less so, I should have been disposed to adopt it. I was faint, and feeble; my wound paining me from the want of a proper dressing. I was, moreover, hungry, as a man may be who for two nights and a day has not tasted food; for I had not eaten a morsel since the supper that preceded the attempt at assassinating me. I was not loth to get under the hospitable roof of Henry Woodley, and partake of the ample breakfast that I knew would there be spread for me.

A short time served for making the change required; and closely enveloped in Walter's Woodley's cloak, with trousers, backwoods fashion, thrust inside my boots, I entered the plantation-house, without exciting any suspicion.

Twenty minutes spent at the toilet, my host assisting, rendered me presentable in the drawing-room, where I was received by his sister with that sort of surprise that caused me a secret gratification. I was gratified by the look given me, in which pleasure at my appearance seemed suddenly to become pain at the sight of my disabled arm.

By the quick paling of her cheek, accompanied by an exclamation of alarm, I felt that Cornelia Woodley had an interest in my fate—something more than a wish for my welfare.

CHAPTER XXII.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

MY story was told to the two brothers, their sister being spared the revelation. I deemed it too fearful

to be imparted to a lady. A quarrel with the boatman, Black, ending in my defeat; my being flung overboard, and compelled to save myself by swimming—this was sufficient to explain the condition in which I had presented myself. I preferred, for the time, submitting to a humiliation.

Wondering, Miss Woodley withdrew, leaving me to be more explicit with her brothers. To them I told the whole story in all its details. It is not necessary to say that both listened to the tale with astonishment. It seemed too horrid for belief, but there was no room for incredulity. My wound was a living witness to at least a portion of its truth, and for the rest, the circumstances were sufficient.

There was a confirmation in the character of Bradley. Both knew the man to be of a bad, brutal nature. Both had heard strange rumors concerning him; conjectures as to his mode of life, and the means by which he had so rapidly become rich, for at present he was so reputed. Gambling had usually been given as the cause, but of late there had been whisperings of a more sinister kind, in regard to the way in which Mr. Bradley had become possessed of so much property.

These had assumed no definite shape. It was only hinted in a general way that he must be engaged in some speculation besides the planting of cotton—something not quite so legitimate.

We are talking of a time when New Orleans and its adjacent neighborhood was not free from a taint of piracy on the high seas—to say nothing of the African slave-trade—with many other combinations of crime almost incredible.

Which of these might be the specialty of the Mississippi planter no one appeared definitely to know.

My experience of the two preceding days had furnished the clew. I had no longer a doubt that, along with the ostensible pursuit of cotton-planting, Mr. Bradley secretly combined the calling of a *privateer*—for by this name is the river robber familiarly known in the region of the Mississippi.

My opinion was adopted by my listeners, as I continued to tell them what I had seen. The facts spoke for themselves. Besides, both had heard of circumstances corroborative of what could be no longer called suspicion. For some years past there had been reports of flat-boats missing upon the Mississippi. Several had been spoken of. Henry Woodley had himself heard of an especial case, which had occurred in the preceding year. It was that of a flat, freighted with cotton, from a plantation somewhere up the Arkansas river. Its owner had dispatched it in charge of a crew of negroes, his own slaves, but had never heard more of either cotton or crew.

Most people supposed these missing boats to have perished in squalls, or "hurricanes" as they are called—to have gone to the bottom with their crews along with them, an occurrence not uncommon upon the Western rivers. But there were others who did not attribute all these losses to the storm; people of a more suspicious way of thinking, in whose memories were still fresh the exploits of the pirate Murrell. This robber had somewhat innocently been assumed to be the last of his race. Though it might be on a smaller scale, it was evident he had a successor in the planter, Bradley.

As we continued to discuss what had occurred, and examine it in all its bearings, the whole scheme became clear. I now learnt, for the first time, that Black and his associate, Stinger, were complete strangers to the Woodley family. They had presented themselves on the Tennessee plantation as professed flat-builders and boatmen; and in this double capacity had they been employed. I recalled the fragment of conversation I had overheard between Black and Bradley on the wood-path of the plantation. It had puzzled me at the time. Its significance was now clear, and I could understand the interest which Bradley had shown in the cotton crop about to be embarked. No doubt it was by his directions that Black and Stinger had shown themselves in that quarter, and undertaken the building of the boat. They were simply his confederates in a good scheme of piracy, of which we had evidence of only a single act—no doubt far from being the first.

And there must have been murder, too! Where were the four negroes? They could not be kept out of the way—with tongues silent in such a transaction. Even if "run off" to Texas and sold, they could still talk; their talking might not be worth much, but it would in time direct suspicion upon the pirates, and put an end to the grand game they were playing with such impunity.

It was a frightful reflection to think of the sad fate of these unfortunate creatures—for we could scarce have a doubt of their having been butchered in cold blood!

There was no time to dwell upon or talk of it. Time enough for that when we had taken steps to be assured of its reality, and, if real, to punish the perpetrators of such an atrocious crime.

And what was the primary step to be taken? That was the question that came before us.

The intentions of the planter-pirate were clear enough. His three confederates would carry the boat on to New Orleans, where the cargo could easily be disposed of. No doubt they had a ready way of doing this through some respectable cotton-broker in collusion with the gang. Their object in taking so much trouble to alter the markings was, of course, to prevent identification. This would be effectual, since all cotton-bales are alike—as much as peas, eggs, or sheep. The huge parallelipedon covered with coarse canvas "bagging," and confined in its cording of hemp, is a thing not to be sworn to. Remove the mark and it may belong to anybody. The two hundred bales sent down from Tennessee, worth over twelve thousand dollars, were for the time the property of Nat Bradley, as could be proved by his plantation mark! Once sold by him no man could

reclaim them, that is, without other evidence to substantiate the claim.

But for what I had witnessed upon the island, this would have been wanting. The boat that carried them would be easily put aside. Like all of its kind, it would be sold at the levee wharf at once, to be broken up for firewood; or, what in this case was more likely, taken down the river and sunk during the darkness of the night.

Would Bradley himself go down in the flat? We thought not. It would scarce comport with his character of rich planter and proprietor. Most likely he would follow it in one of the steamboats from Natchez or some near port. He may have taken the very one that brought Walter Woodley to his brother's plantation.

He could hail it from some landing below.

What would be our best course to pursue?

Henry's counsel was that we should all three proceed to New Orleans, taking advantage of the first boat that came down the river, or what would be better still, riding post-haste to Natchez, and getting a boat there—one of the regular packets from that place to the great city below. By this means we might anticipate the sale of the cotton, and so recover it, at the same time bringing to justice the scoundrels that had stolen it.

This scheme might have answered well enough as regarded the three confederates. But how about their chief? It would leave him a loophole of escape, and this could not be thought of. For my part, I was determined to punish the man who had twice made an attempt upon my life. I looked upon Black as but the representative of Bradley.

We had no proof to connect the latter with any of the crimes that had been committed. I could not swear to having seen him at the lagoon. My oath as to the identification of his voice would be too slight a testimony upon which to convict him, even of connivance. He would deny that he had been present; and as to placing his name upon the cotton-bales, any one might do that without either his knowledge or sanction.

Unless one of the three confederates should turn State's evidence, the chief pirate would escape the punishment he so justly deserved.

It would be a pity that any of the party should have such a chance, and there was no need for it. Let the thing take its course, let the cotton be sold and delivered, and then, whether warehoused by a broker, or bought by a bona-fide purchaser, it would become known to whom the purchase-money was to be paid. Then we could discover who was chief of the pirates, and get the whole gang within the meshes of the law.

This was my advice, warmly seconded by Walter, and when fairly set before him, also appearing best to his brother.

It was agreed we should all three go down to New Orleans, place ourselves in communication with a respectable solicitor, and obtain the assistance of the law in the accomplishment of our purpose.

At the close of our deliberations a surprise awaited us. Outside we heard the hoof-stroke of a horse. On looking through the window, we saw a man dismounting by the gate of the inclosure, and fastening his bridle to the post. As he faced toward the house, we recognized the piratical ruffian whose punishment we had been planning.

CHAPTER XXIII.

WAITING FOR A BOAT.

VISIT unexpected and ill-timed—what could be its object? This was the thought of all three.

I, for one, must not be seen by him. The sight of me would frustrate all our plans—even the knowledge that I still lived.

Neither should the Tennessean. His presence would require explanation, and perhaps cause a change in the programme we had sketched out for the pirate.

Our host alone must receive him. There was just time for Henry to get out of the drawing-room, and close the door after him, when Mr. Bradley stepped into the porch.

Uninvited he could not gracefully go further.

Walter and I, silent inside, could hear every word that was said.

Bradley spoke first.

"Well, Hen," he said, after the usual exchange of salutations, "reckon I've got here too late."

"For what?" was the natural inquiry.

"Boat. I want to go down to Orleans. The Yazoo City was to have left Vicksburg yesterday evening, and I thought I might catch her at your landing. I suppose I'm too late, as I heard a boat pass while I was coming through the woods. She was going down, and I reckon it must have been the City."

There was an interval of silence, during which we awaited Henry's response. He made none. The presence of such a guest—under such circumstances—had taken him by surprise, and he was no doubt hesitating as to what he should say.

As Bradley had put no direct interrogatory, he did not stay for an answer, but continued:

"She must have passed here very early—before you were out of your bed. Do you think any of your niggers saw her? They would know if it was the City. They could read the name, I reckon!"

"Yes," replied Henry, at length, speaking with evasion, "some of them did see a boat pass down. It was not the Yazoo City, but an up-river boat from the Ohio, I believe."

"Oh! in that case the City will be along yet. She ought to be near now. I'll go down to the landing to look for her. You don't mind sending one of your niggers to fetch my horse back to the house here? There is one of mine coming after to take him home."

"Certainly not," said Henry evidently pleased at

the prospect of his visitor making such a short stay. "One of them shall go down with you at once."

"And look ye, Henry Woodley!" continued Bradley, with a change of tone, "now that I'm here I may as well tell you what I intend doing. I want that \$2,000. I want it d—d bad; and I mean to have it. I've asked you for it half a score of times, till I'm sick of asking. And now I'll give you till I come back from Orleans, which will be in about a fortnight. If you can't pay then, why I must get judgment on the bill, and take some of your niggers. I'm sorry to be sharp with you; but I must have the money."

"When you come back—a fortnight you say—perhaps I may have—"

The debtor was thinking that before a fortnight's time he might be relieved of his liability in a way his creditor little expected.

"Oh! d—n your *perhaps*!" rudely interrupted the latter. "If you don't have it—Hilloa! what's that?"

As he uttered this exclamation, we could hear Bradley rushing further out upon the porch, as if to inform himself of something that was passing outside.

There was an interval of profound stillness, and through a side-window in the drawing-room, in which the casement stood open, we could distinguish faint and far off the hollow sound of the "scape-pipe."

"By Jove, it's the boat! Ten chances to one if I'll be in time to catch her. Send after me for the horse!"

As he issued this impudent command, the unwelcome visitor hurried on through the gate, leaped into the saddle and went off at a gallop along the road, toward the landing.

As promised, a negro was dispatched after to take charge of his horse, and for some time we all listened in great anxiety. If Bradley should miss the boat, he would be sure to come back to the house and perhaps remain there waiting for another. This would be a serious interference with our plans, and might end in altogether defeating them, by his discovering of our presence upon the plantation!

It was a pleasant sound, that continued hissing of steam, that came borne upon the breeze from the direction of the river.

It told us that the boat was laying to, to take on board a passenger, who could be no other than Nat Bradley.

This was soon after confirmed by the return of his horse, ridden by the darky with the saddle stripped of its bags.

The planter pirate had posted to New Orleans to dispose of his late capture, perfectly unsuspecting that the owner was so near, and at the same time taking measures for the recovery of the spoil.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE WHITE KERCHIEF.

WHILE thanking the Yazoo City for having so opportunely disembarrassed us of the presence of Nat Bradley, we felt that he must be followed as speedily as possible.

If the flat had been taken on direct after leaving Devil's Island—and in all likelihood it had—it should reach New Orleans in four days at the furthest. Its crew would convey it as fast as possible, knowing the danger of delay. They could assist the current with a pair of sweeps, with which the craft was provided.

The Yazoo City would be there before them, but how about the boat by which we ourselves should have to make the journey?

There was no certainty when another steamboat might come along. It might be in an hour, but it might also be two or three days. A delay of the latter kind would be fatal to our scheme.

Once alongside the flat-boat-wharf on the New Orleans levee, it would not take much time to discharge the cargo, and remove it to some safe place of storage; and, as for the flat itself, it could be disposed of in a single night. We might reach New Orleans to find no trace either of boat or cotton, and as for the worthless composing the crew, it would be ten chances to one of our ever setting eyes on any of them again.

The cotton itself might be discovered. That was probable enough. It could not go aboard ship without undergoing the process of the cotton-press. This would cause delay, and it could be found either in the shed, attached to one of the great presses, or in the storeroom-house of a broker.

But when found, what then? It bore Bradley's plantation-mark along with his name. He would be upon the spot himself ready to swear to it, and Walter Woodley could not do the same.

Indeed, the young Tennessean was not so sure of being able to identify the flat. He had taken but little notice of it, when being built and laden, leaving all that to Black and his assistant Stinger.

Among these boats there is as much similarity as between the bales of cotton.

My identification of either craft or cargo would be still more doubtful. I could only make it good by finding the crew aboard of it, to all three of whom I could swear distinctly. But to bring Bradley within the power of the law, something more would be required than the testimony I was yet able to give. It would be necessary to connect him with the other three, either as their confederate or chief.

This could be done by allowing him to deal with the cotton on its arrival in New Orleans, taking care to secure the others before they had parted from the flat.

To do this we must reach New Orleans as soon as they, or not many hours after. A single day behind that of their arrival, and we might be too late.

Walter was surprised to find that his brother owed Nat Bradley two thousand dollars. I could see, how-

ever, that he scarce regretted it. It explained that sinister attachment which existed between the two, and which it had grieved him to think was a friendship. Now he knew it to be of a different nature, and preferred the knowledge.

"Never mind about the debt, Walt," said Henry, in answer to the inquiry as to how it had been contracted. "It is not *honestly due*; and, if we succeed in bringing the scoundrel to justice, I suppose I shall be released from the liability."

"Ah! and if our suspicions prove true, I shall lose twice the amount, even if I recover my cotton."

"How?"

"Why, my negroes—four of the best hands we had. Poor fellows, I care not so much for the money, but to think that they have been made away with—murdered. It is fearful!"

"It is, indeed," said the elder, and less sentimental brother. "But in any case you will not lose by that, I mean in money. There are plenty of likely hands on Nat Bradley's plantation, though I've never known much of either it or them. Of course you can recover the full value of what you have lost; and, if it all prove true, you will have to proceed against Mr. Bradley's heirs instead of himself. There's not a moment to be lost. In my opinion the best way would be for you, brother, to ride down to Natchez as fast as a horse can carry you, and see if you can get a boat there. There might be one of the Natchez and New Orleans packets starting at once; besides, you have still the chance of the up-river boat. If you get one before to-morrow night you will be in good time. Once in New Orleans, go direct to our old friend, Charles Sawyer, who's practicing law among the creoles. He's sharp enough for what we want. You'll find his office in St. Charles street, near the Hotel. I can stay and watch our own landing, and follow by the first boat. Our friend here, I hope, will have no objection to go down along with me. Without him we would be helpless. You would lose your cotton, and I should have to pay a debt contracted with a swindler, which, but for foul play, I should never have been owing."

Henry Woodley seemed all at once to have changed his character, displaying an energy for which I had not given him credit. Perhaps it might be accounted for by his hope of getting rid of an incubus hitherto harassing him.

"Now, Walt!" he continued, "get ready to ride at top speed for Natchez. I'll order you the best horse in my stable. Yoo, Dick!" he cried, stepping out into the porch, and hailing one of the negroes seen outside the inclosure. "Put the saddle on the sorrel mare, and bring her round to the gate. Be quick about it."

In a few minutes the sorrel stood by the gate, Miss Woodley wondering about the preparations.

"Never mind, Corneel!" said her brother, in answer to her request for an explanation. "Walter is called to New Orleans on pressing business, and I am going to take boat for Natchez. I shall have to go down myself by the next snorter that comes along; and, as our young friend here promises to accompany me, we can't leave you alone. So you must make the trip too. On the way down I may let you into our secret. Now will that content you?"

Miss Woodley made no response. She smiled and seemed satisfied. The bantering tone in which her brother spoke, implied that there could not be much amiss. I too felt content at the prospect of having her for a fellow-passenger, on board of a Mississippi steamboat.

I could not help remembering that it was in a similar situation I had first surrendered to her charms.

And after all, Walter went with us. There was no need for going that long gallop to Natchez.

Just as he was setting foot in the stirrup, the well-known "boom" of a steamboat was heard, awakening the echoes of the woods. It came from the up-river direction.

"Quick, Walt!" cried his brother. "Ride down to the landing, and signal her to stop. A white handkerchief will do it. Have you got one?"

"Here," said the fair "Corneel," gliding like a sylph toward the gate, and handing him her bit of embroidered "cambric." "I suppose this will do?"

"Ah!" thought I, giving way to a romantic fancy, "for the possession of such a trophy, the Spanish Armada might have come to an anchor."

Walter posted like a thunderbolt, while his brother and sister commenced packing their portmanteaus. I had none to pack, and remained standing in the porch, listening for the stopping of the approaching steamer.

I could soon tell that the signal had been successful. "The bark" of the boat, heard at short intervals, became changed to a hiss—a sure sign that the play of the engine was suspended.

Shortly after, the booming recommenced; but the frequent ringing of the pilot's bell told that the boat was being brought in to the landing.

This is only true of the inferior class of boats, or where the passenger expected is supposed to be one worth consideration. There were few captains on the river that would not have laid to for a Woodley, and fewer still could they have told that the white signal was the kerchief of the fair Corneila.

On our arrival at the landing, we found the boat with staging-plank out and ready. It was no humble "stern-wheel" that had thus condescended; but the noble "Sultana," in whose luxuriant saloon we steamed toward the "Crescent City."

Before arriving at our destination, we had the satisfaction to know that the planter pirate did not precede us. On passing Point Coupee, we also passed a little steamboat, and left her puffing asthmatically behind us. Upon her paddle-boxes we could read the lettering, "Yazoo City."

Still more to the purpose, we saw standing upon the hurricane-deck the man who was causing us to make the *improvised* voyage—the planter pirate.

We saw him through the green *jalousies* of a "state-room," taking care he should not see us. Even then, the sight of any of our party, or his suspicion of our being aboard the Sultana, might have defeated our plans. We gave him no chance for either one or the other.

He was standing alone—abait the pilot-house—apparently wrapt in contemplation. He may have been thinking of the future—of the disposal of his plunder. Or was his mind dwelling upon the past—upon the dark deeds which he had no doubt committed? It might be that his thoughts were still more bitterly occupied, with that fair being who stood by my side, and who now regarded him only with disgust.

I cared not to speculate on the past. I felt confident that between Nat Bradley and Cornelia Woodley there had been no *compromises*. Whatever there had been, enough to know that it was now over.

The big boat passed on, leaving the Yazoo City dancing like a waltz in her wake. Behind the glass shed that sheltered the pilot Nat Bradley disappeared from my sight.

In less than twenty hours after, we were passing Lafayette; and the grand dome of the St. Charles Hotel came under our eyes, rising high above the roofs of the Crescent City.

"We must not go there," suggested Henry Woodley, pointing to the conspicuous object.

"And why?" asked Walter. "It is the best hotel in New Orleans, is it not?"

"True," answered the elder brother, wiser in the ways of the great Southern city. "By all titles the best. But just for that reason we must shun it. We should not be twenty-four hours under its roof before finding for a fellow-guest the man we have no wish to encounter."

"Ah! I understand you," answered the Tennesseean. "You think that he will go there?"

"Sure of it. I know the St. Charles to be his regular stopping-place. I've seen him there in its grand drinking-saloon, swaggering among the loud-bell of its bullies."

"In that case we had best go elsewhere."

"We must do so. We can stop somewhere in the French quarters—at the St. Louis, or even some more humble hostelry. It will never do for him to know that we are in New Orleans, and as for our young friend here, he must keep out of sight until the time when his testimony be required to seal the fate of these scoundrels, whose exposure will perhaps explain why so many flats have gone to the bottom of the Mississippi. No doubt, sir," continued the speaker, turning to me with an odd air of jocularity, "you will be able to clear the character of the hurricane."

By this time the Sultana had commenced sounding her pilot-bells—those mysterious signals by which the steersman communicates his wishes to the Vulcan-like individual who stands by the engine below.

The effect was soon apparent by the boat rounding in to the stream, and bringing up alongside the levee.

With our light luggage, we were soon inside a two-horse coach, and trotting over the oyster-shells toward the St. Louis Hotel.

CHAPTER XXV.

A LOUISIANA LAWYER.

Once installed in our hotel, we proceeded upon the business that brought us to New Orleans. The lawyer was looked up, and the circumstances laid before him.

Charley Sawyer appeared far less surprised by the story than might have been expected. Though still but a young man, he had been long enough in the Crescent City to become acquainted with the inner secrets of its social life. Engaged in practice at its criminal court, he had met with those strange types of crime for which New Orleans has been historically distinguished. As to our plan of proceeding, his advice corresponded with what we had already conceived.

"Although everything seems straight for bringing the scoundrels to justice," said he, "we must proceed with caution. The law here is rather a rough institution as yet; and where men's liberty is concerned—to say nothing of their lives—the testimony must be clear and positive. If they have actually killed the poor negroes, there must be no loopholes left for them to escape—not one of them, and least of all their chief. Bradley must be permitted to sell the cotton. That will be needed to connect him with the theft, robbery, or whatever we may have to call it."

"But suppose he have no opportunity?" suggested Walter Woodley. "There may not be any one to purchase it all at once."

"No fear of that. I shall myself find him a purchaser. By good luck I chance to be acquainted with a cotton-broker who can be trusted in such a delicate negotiation. He can offer such a price as will secure a trade; and before the money be paid over we can get a warrant by deposition, and lodge Messrs. Bradley, Black & Co. in the calaboose. After that, the thing should be easy enough."

"And now," continued the lawyer, "we must act; and the first thing is, to find out whether the flat has got in. Would any of you know the boat? You, Mr. Walter Woodley, ought to be able to identify your own property."

"I really don't think I can," replied the young planter; "but I should know Black and Stinger, the men in charge. I could see them aboard."

"True; but they might also see you, if you went

near enough to distinguish them. That would never do."

"I fancy I can manage that part of it," I suggested. "Black can be but slightly acquainted with my face, though I shall never forget his. By sacrificing my mustache, and borrowing a pair of whiskers from one of these creole *costumers*—that and a change of dress would do, would it not?"

"The very thing," said the astute Sawyer. "You can put on a light camel cloak—they are worn here. It will conceal the mark Mr. Black has for the time put upon you. That, with a broad-brimmed palm-leaf hat, and a pair of cottonade trowsers, will turn you into a creole complete. As for you, Henry Woodley, and your brother, your best plan will be for both of you to go back to the hotel, stay within doors, and wait till I communicate with you. It will not do for either to be seen in the streets—at least till we get the birds safe inside the cage."

In obedience to Sawyer's instructions, the two brothers returned to the hotel, while I remained in his office to make the transformation required.

In order to avoid suspicion, a razor was obtained, and I did the shaving myself. It was not altogether pleasant to part with my pet mustaches; but I consoled myself with two thoughts—one that they would grow again, and the other that before they did I should see the man who had twice attempted my life stand in the felon's dock.

The garments necessary for my disguise were readily got at one of the levee "clothing stores," and the whiskers from a costume shop with which New Orleans, noted for its masked balls, is abundantly provided.

In less than an hour I was ready to play the part of a detective.

With Mr. Sawyer acting as guide we sallied forth, and took our way toward the flat-boat wharf.

Those not acquainted with the New Orleans "levees" must be told that it is a landing full four miles in length; that only a portion of it is provided with wharves, strong wooden platforms, supported by piles driven deep into the river-bank. Between, are spaces where the natural slope of the levee is left unfurnished with such structures, and where boats, both flats and steamers, at low water, can project their staging-planks into the mud.

But by certain municipal laws the levee is apportioned, so that each kind of craft—ships, steamboats, flats, and *rafts*—has a stretch of shore appropriated to itself. There are the shipping wharves—two sets of them—the steamboat wharves, and, last of all, that portion of the levee set apart for the odd-looking embarkations known as "keeds" and "flat-boats."

Of these there is usually a large "fleet" lying along shore—especially at that time of the year when the up-country produce is floated down from a hundred head-waters to the great depot and entrepot of the Mississippi Valley.

It was just then the season; and on reaching the flat-boat wharf we found some hundreds of these antediluvian-like structures lying against the wharf, and so closely packed together that a man might have stepped from the roof of one to the other, throughout the whole conglomeration.

Sauntering along, without appearing to be particularly interested in any of them, Mr. Sawyer and I proceeded to make a reconnaissance. Most of them had their stagings out and were delivering their cargoes on shore—hogsheds of sugar and tobacco, barrels of pork, and bags of Indian corn. Some appeared to have been already emptied, and to be watching for a purchaser who would break them up for firewood.

There were a few lying a little way off from the levee, as if crowded out of place, and waiting for a chance to come in.

One of these particularly drew my attention. I fancied I had seen it before. It was only a vague conjecture, but I could not help thinking that it was the same craft on board of which I had spent some very unpleasant hours, and from which I had been so unceremoniously ejected. No one appeared above decks. Else I might have more easily identified it.

For some time my companion and I sauntered back and forward along the levee, keeping an eye on this particular flat. I had already communicated to him my suspicion that it was the one we were in search of. We watched the hatch-door of the caboose; but, though standing open, no one came out or went in; and no face could be seen.

At length occurred to me that if we could get aboard, I might find a trace to satisfy me. There was no plank communicating with the shore; but there was one to the adjacent boat, which was engaged in getting out its cargo, and by using this, we could step to the roof of the craft suspected.

Sawyer led the way. A slight apology to the owner of the discharging flat was sufficient to frank us, and we passed on over its roof, and stepped across the chasm dividing the two.

I had just time to see that Stinger, with his scrubbing-brush, had not altogether effaced that hideous stain, when a head popped up through the hatch, and a rough voice demanded "what we were doing there?" The demand was prefaced by an oath. I had seen enough to satisfy me before perceiving that the speaker was Mr. Black; and without staying to hear the reply, which I left the lawyer to make, I averted my face, and returned, apparently unconcerned, to the shore.

I could hear Mr. Sawyer making some excuse—that we were only exploring out of idle curiosity—and then overtaking me, we sauntered from the spot.

"From your behavior," said he, as soon as we had got to a safe distance, "I took it that our polite friend is one of the pirates. Is it so?"

"The man who gave me this," I replied, flinging up the corner of the camel cloak, and showing my slung limb.

"So far good! We've tried the jackals; now for the lion himself. But first let us make sure of the birds in hand before going after that in the bush. You stay here till I return to you."

And without further speech the lawyer walked hurriedly away in the direction of the houses. I did not quite comprehend the meaning of his figurative language.

It was soon made known, on his returning to me, accompanied by a man of that peculiar cast of countenance not easily mistaken. In his keen, inquiring eye I could recognize the detective.

"You see that flat?" said Sawyer, at the same time casting his eyes in a different direction—across the river to "Algiers." "I mean the one next to that unloading the Cincinnati pork-barrels."

"Ay, ay!" responded the detective, just glancing at the object spoken of, and then also appearing interested in something supposed to be on the opposite shore.

"Very well," muttered the lawyer; "you will keep it under your eye; take note of who comes ashore—who goes on board; and don't lose sight of it, either by day or night, till it begins to get out its cargo, which is cotton. As soon as you see the first bale rolled upon the bank you come to my office as quick as your legs can carry you."

"All right," signified the man, rather by a nod of the head than any expressed speech, while Sawyer, by a sign, summoned me to follow him.

"Now," said he, as we walked off together, "the first chapter is complete, and we must proceed to the second. We've done, for the time, with the flat. Let us go in for higher game, to be found upon a steamboat."

Saying this, Mr. Sawyer directed his steps toward the steamboat wharves. I made no inquiry as to his purpose. It was plain to me, and I accompanied him without making remark.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SPY-GLASS.

TEN minutes' brisk walking brought us alongside that portion of the levee set apart for steamboats—those huge embarkations of the Mississippi, many of which are not inappropriately styled "floating palaces."

At least two-score of them lay opposite the landing; some coming in, others going out; some taking cargo aboard and others discharging it on the wharf.

It was a crowded and busy scene; but unlike as among the flats, we anticipated no difficulty in identifying the particular boat with which we had business. We were in search of the "Yazoo City."

A single stroll along the line, and we saw she was not there. Scarcely expecting her, we were pleased to discover she had not yet come in. It was just what we wanted.

"And now," said Mr. Sawyer, "we must stay till she does come in, and follow on the track of the expected passenger. Where was it you passed her?"

"Near Point Coupee."

"Let me see," said the lawyer, taking out his watch and calculating the time that had transpired since the arrival of the Sultana.

"The Yazoo boat should have been in; she cannot be long now, unless indeed she has stopped somewhere along the coast to take in cargo. In that case we may have a protracted vigil of it. It's not very pleasant standing in this hot sun. Besides, it looks rather queer, you carrying your cloak about your shoulders. Unfortunately we cannot do this business by deputy, as it wants some one who knows our man by sight. For myself, I never saw Mr. Nat Bradley, though I've heard some strange stories about him, almost as strange as that you've told me. Confound that cloak! Those fellows appear to take notice of it. Stay! I have it. I think I see a better place from which to make observation—at all events we shall escape it ourselves. This way."

Without knowing the intention of my chaperone, I followed him. He had turned short off from the steamboat wharf, and was proceeding in the direction of the houses that fronted upon the levee some two hundred yards from the river's bank.

"You see that restaurant?" he said, pointing to a large establishment toward which we were wending. I answered in the affirmative.

"There is a saloon on the second floor, with open windows. Go up there and call for a couple of 'sherry cobbles.' I will be with you by the time they are mixed."

I did as directed, passing inside the restaurant, making my way up-stairs, and ordering the iced drinks.

The lawyer came in along with them. I could see that he had a telescope in his hand, fresh purchased from a "store."

"The very place for our purpose," he said, walking to one of the windows and glancing at the steamboats. "The Yazoo City can't come in without our seeing her from here, and with the help of this magnifier we may bring Mr. Bradley near enough to recognition. What!" he continued, placing the telescope to his eye, and looking along the levee; "have we a view of the flat as well? By my word we have. I can see the pork-boat—the flat itself, and Riggs, on post where we left him, as plain as the dome of St. Charles. Good! We shall now know the movements both of Mr. Bradley and his confederates, without getting out of our chairs. So no more about them for the present. Let's see how we can kill time with our sherry cobbles."

We had not much time to kill. We had only just commenced sipping through our straws, when we heard a "chuck, chuck" in the direction of Lafa-

yette; and, looking up the river, we beheld a small boat making down for the wharves.

Her straight sides told she was a "stern-wheeler," but as she forged round in the crescent-like bend from which New Orleans derives one of its well-known names, my companion, with the glass at his eye, pronounced her the Yazoo City.

"Here!" he said, as the boat began to draw toward the wharf, "it's your turn with the telescope. Get Mr. Bradley in your field of vision, and keep him there till he comes near enough for the naked eye. What a divine conception my thinking of the spy-glass—quite a new idea in detection. We're not only saved exposure to the hot sun, but my man will never suspect the presence of a spy. If he should see us looking out of the window, he'd be cunning to guess our object."

The lawyer continued to talk, but I paid only slight attention to what he was saying. I knew it was only to fill up the time. I had got the Yazoo City in the field-view of the telescope and was raking her fore and aft in search of our pirate passenger.

I soon discovered the object of my search. He was upon the guards, near the top of the stairs leading down to the boiler-deck. I could make out a pair of saddle-bags hanging over his arm. I knew it was the whole of his luggage, and that he was prepared to step ashore as soon as the staging was shot out.

I announced my discovery to my companion. "Let me have a squint at him," he requested. "It may be as well for me to get acquainted with the phiz of the interesting gentleman, and see how it will figure in a court of justice. In a Panama hat and blue cottonades, you say?"

"Yes; on the saloon deck, close to the head of the stairway."

"I have got his precious picture in my eye. Dressed like a dandy, too! Patent boots, and grand ruffled shirt! What a flash swaggoner! Let me see—let me see. I think I've seen that fellow before."

While my companion still kept his eye to the telescope, as if to familiarize himself with the person of the pirate planter, the little boat struggled into her place, shoved out her staging, and gave the impatient passengers a chance of stepping ashore.

Now that I had recognized him I no longer required the glass, and I could see that Mr. Bradley was among the first to take advantage of it.

As soon as he had reached the crest of the levee, he turned along in the direction of the flat-boat landing.

"Good!" whispered Sawyer. "Just as I expected. We shall not have long to wait before something turns up that will enable us to trap him."

"Should we not follow him?"

"Not yet. Better let him first go down to the flat—aboard if he intends it. We can see what he does through this. When he comes ashore again, then it will be time enough to track him to his hotel. Such a grand fellow as that, unless he have some secret haunt of his own, will be sure to put up at the St. Charles. Yes! he's making direct for the flat!"

I could see this myself; but after a time, though the distance was still near enough for the naked eye, the pirate became mixed among the levee crowd of promenaders, and was lost to my sight.

"Good again!" muttered my companion. "He's going aboard the boat. . . . No! one of the crew coming ashore to meet him. It's the same who so politely received us. . . . Now they are together on the levee, and engaged in conversation. I wish we could only hear it. No doubt it would help our testimony a bit. Riggs has got his eyes upon them; askant, like a drake listening to thunder. Come! we must quit this, or he may escape us. As he's not going aboard, he won't stay long on the levee. We shall get down there about the time he has finished that bit of private conversation. Come!"

Tossing off what remained of the "cobblers," without the intervention of the straw, we paid the score, passed out into the street, and turned toward the flat-boat landing.

The lawyer had guessed the time truly. As we advanced along the line of shop fronts, we came once more in sight of him in the ruffled shirt and sky-blue cottonades. He was just parting from Black, who having received his instructions, hurried back to the cotton-boat.

Bradley himself came crossing toward the houses, on his way to a hotel, which proving to be the St. Charles, once more made good the conjecture of my companion.

As we dogged him up Poydras street, across Tchoupattoulas and Camp, and into the great domed hostility of St. Charles, he little dreamt that the spies of justice were treading so close upon his heels.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DEPOSITIONS.

I WAS curious to know what would be the next step in the strategy of the New Orleans lawyer. I was not left long to speculate upon it.

"Now," he said, hurrying off once more in the direction of the levee, "I want a man willing to buy two hundred bales of cotton, without losing any time or making cavil as to price."

"You will not find such a man, I should think."

"I will! and in ten minutes' time, if I mistake not. Come and see!"

After passing two or three blocks in less than the time stipulated, my chaparrone entered the door of a large warehouse-like building, on the front of which appeared, painted in large black letters:

"CHEETHAM, COTTON-BROKER."

I had just deciphered this lettering as Mr. Sawyer came out, bringing the cotton-broker along with him.

After hastily introducing me to Mr. Cheetham, the lawyer led off through the street in the direction of his office, my new acquaintance and myself close following.

The office was not far off, and we were soon inside it. Mr. Cheetham was told the reason why he had been dragged from his desk, and, for the third time making good the words of my singular companion, consented at once to make purchase of the cotton.

I was not so much surprised at this, having taken part in the explanation. Of course the cotton-broker was told the whole story, and the scheme by which the pirates were to be punished.

I was far more astonished at the matter-of-fact manner in which Mr. Cheetham listened to the details of the piracy, and the suspected assassination of the negroes, events which to me seemed tragical enough to startle the coldest imagination.

But I knew it was only caused by the commonness of such crimes, in a land then almost lawless, and not by any want of feeling on the part of Mr. Cheetham.

On the contrary, he entered warmly into the scheme for the conviction of the malefactors.

While we were still discussing it, a man entered the outer door, and soon after protruded his face inside that of the office. It was the vidette we had left on the levee.

"Well, Riggs," asked the lawyer, "what movements?"

"They're rolling the cotton ashore."

"Good; we must go and buy it."

"You'll have to be quick, then. They've engaged a lot of drays. I reckon they're about taking it to a storage."

The lawyer seemed to reflect.

"After all, let them," he said; "we can follow it there. But no," he continued, after another spell of considering; "you must see it, Cheetham, as it comes out of the boat. If you go too soon to where they are storing it, it might cause suspicion. Your best way is to drop down to the wharf, ask for a sample of the cotton, say you are ready to buy, and then you will ascertain who has the selling of it. After that you can conclude the bargain anywhere—at the St. Charles Hotel, if Mr. Bradley prefer it. Meanwhile, I must be off to a magistrate to get out a warrant against the fellows upon the flat, lest they give us the slip as soon as their ark is empty."

"Riggs, you first show Mr. Cheetham the cotton, then take a coach to the St. Louis Hotel, ask for Mr. Henry Woodley, and tell him and his brother to come here at once. After that, coach it back to the wharf, and see where they are taking the stuff to. You can follow the drays at a distance, and don't be seen in company with Mr. Cheetham. Old birds, such as these appear to be, may scent the lime about you. Go, Cheetham; buy the cotton; pay what price you choose—on a credit. But don't pay cash for it, till you draw upon me!"

Smiling at these jocular instructions, the cotton-broker went off to obey them, Riggs going before him to point out the commodity he was to purchase.

"Now, sir," said the lawyer, turning to me, "we shall want your assistance—the most important of all. Without it our case might come to nothing. We must wait for the Woodleys. Walter can make a charge, as the owner of the cotton and the negroes. God help us! Henry's testimony won't be worth much, still it will strengthen the depositions you are able to make. Once we get the lot in limbo, we shall find plenty of evidence. We shall make a trip to the Devil's Island, and see what's at the bottom of the lagoon. It's terrible to think of it. Take a cigar, and let's talk about something else."

I did as desired, and lighting our cigars, we conversed upon lighter subjects.

In due time the Woodleys made their appearance; and we all went to the office of an alderman.

The depositions were formally made, and we obtained a warrant for Black, Stinger, and the third individual whose name was unknown. We regretted not being able to include the name of Nathaniel Bradley, but we hoped soon to return to the seat of justice, better provided with data for an affidavit.

The alderman was asked to keep our secret until the time came off for committal, which of course he promised to do, and we returned to the office of the attorney to await the action of Cheetham.

We had not been there many minutes when the cotton-broker came in. His countenance betokens success.

"Well?" inquired Sawyer.

"I've bought it—every bale."

"From whom?"

"From a Mississippi planter, by name Nathaniel Bradley."

"Cheap?" jokingly inquired the lawyer.

"So cheap that I wish it was a bona fide purchase. I found Mr. Bradley by no means exacting as to price. He closed with my first bid. I'm to meet him at the St. Charles to-morrow, and pay down the cash. Meanwhile the cotton is being sent to the Empire Press subject to my orders on its being paid for. I suppose you have no objection to that, Mr. Woodley?"

"Not the slightest," replied the Tennessee planter; "any press, so long as I can recover it."

"Now, gentlemen," said Sawyer, "I want you all to go with me to the alderman's office; but let us scatter and march two, two and one. Five such formidable people in the streets together might look as if we intended storming the municipality. Cheetham, you know the place; take Mr. Henry Woodley. And you, sir," continued the lawyer, addressing himself to me, "have not forgotten it. May I request you to become the guide of your friend Walter? As for myself, you will find me at the fountain of justice."

We started from the lawyer's office, going as di-

rected, and soon after returned to it armed with the authority we had sought.

That night Nathaniel Bradley, William Black, James Stinger and a man whose name we were able to insert into the warrant as Lemuel Croucher, and whose condition we discovered to be that of overseer on the aforesaid Bradley's plantation, found lodgings in the common calaboose of the Crescent City.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

CONVICTION.

I SHALL not weary the patience of my reader with the details of the trial that followed. Enough for him to know that we succeeded in securing a conviction against all four of the accused. They were convicted not only of piracy, but murder, of which we found the proofs, alas too clear!

In dragging the lagoon to strengthen our testimony with the scraps of cotton-bagging I had seen the pirate sinking below the surface, an appalling object was brought up on the prongs of the drag—the body of a negro that had been kept at anchor below by a bag of iron tied around the neck.

His face was disfigured by the slashes of a knife; but not so much as to hinder Woodley from identifying him as one of the four who had been sent to assist in the navigation of the flat.

There was a bullet-hole through his breast, no doubt from the shot I had heard fired when half-asleep, followed by that death-shriek that so long rung in my ears.

We searched for the other three, dragging the whole lagoon, as well as the strait that led into it. They could not be found. In all likelihood their bodies had been sunk in the deep channel of the river—a safer place of concealment.

Why one had been brought up the lagoon we could not tell, unless it was that he had been killed outside and allowed to lie upon the flat, for the want of time, while turning out of the current, to dispose of his body by flinging it overboard.

We succeeded in fishing up the bundles of cast bagging that carried the Woodley mark, and, along with them, two other lots of older date, and bearing a different brand. One set of these was gone to rottenness and rags; on the other could still be deciphered a name and mark that led to its identification. It had covered the cotton of that missing boat belonging to the Arkansas planter, of which Henry Woodley had heard.

How many of these horrid tragedies had been enacted on the Devil's Island it was impossible to say, but certainly one every year. No wonder at planter Bradley becoming rapidly rich! No wonder at the Devil's Island being deemed a haunted spot, inspiring terror among the black-skinned creatures who had occasion to go near it. To many of them, its gloomy lagoon, or the swift current sweeping around it, had proved more destructive than the fancied demon of their superstitious fears.

We had no difficulty in making out the case clear against the pirates; but, although we proved them guilty of the double crime—robbery and murder—to say nothing of the attempt at assassinating myself—the severest sentence that could be obtained was *penitentiary for life*. There was no proof of their having murdered a white man!

Bradley did not submit long to his confinement. In less than a year afterward I heard that he had put an end to his life.

As to Black, Stinger and Croucher, for what I know to the contrary, all three may be still inside the strong walls of the Louisiana State prison, working out their tedious term of compulsory penitence.

I might turn to other themes, and describe scenes of a more tranquil character. But no doubt, by this time, the reader is tired of my narrative. He will not care to listen to the oft-told tale, the old, old story, as it was told to Cornelia Woodley. Suffice it to say that she listened to, liked it, and said "Yes."

THE END.

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